THE MESSAGE

LOUIS TRACY

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THE MESSAGE

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Suddenly he sprang upright *Frontispiece*

THE MESSAGE

BY

LOUIS TRACY

Author of "The Wings of the Morning," "The Wheel o' Fortune," "The Captain of the Kansas," etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY JOSEPH CUMMINGS CHASE

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

PAGE

DERELICTS 1

CHAPTER II

HOW THE MESSAGE WAS DELIVERED 19

CHAPTER III

WHEREIN A STRONG MAN YIELDS TO CIRCUMSTANCES . . 36

CHAPTER IV

FIGUERO MAKES A DISCOVERY 53

CHAPTER V

A MAN AND A STORY — BOTH UNEMOTIONAL 71

CHAPTER VI

WHEREIN WARDEN SETS A NEW COURSE 90

CHAPTER VII

TWO WOMEN 112

CHAPTER VIII

SHOWING HOW MANY ROADS LEAD THE SAME WAY . . 131

CHAPTER IX

WARDEN BEGINS HIS ODYSSEY 150

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PAGE

CHAPTER X

HASSAN'S TOWER — AND THE COLONIAL OFFICE 172

CHAPTER XI

THE BLUE MAN — AND A WHITE 193

CHAPTER XII

EVELYN HAS UNEXPECTED VISITORS 215

CHAPTER XIII

EVELYN ENTERS THE FRAY 234

CHAPTER XIV

THE DRUMS OF OKU 258

CHAPTER XV

WHEREIN ONE SURPRISE BEGETS MANY 279

CHAPTER XVI

A FIVE MINUTES' FIGHT 300

CHAPTER XVII

THE SETTLEMENT 319

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Suddenly he sprang upright . . . . . *Frontispiece*

PAGE

The presence of Figuero in Cowes was perplexing 49

The stealthy menace of those evil eyes was startling . . . 84

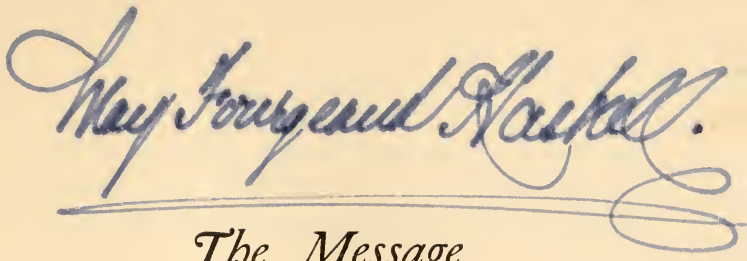
Why did you fail to recognize the girl ? 116

There was no mistaking the malice 183

He could feel the thrill of terror that shook the moullah . . 212

Peter, you are a wonder 238

There was no doubt in his mind that the end had come . . 304



The Message

CHAPTER I

DERELICTS

"IT'S fine!" said Arthur Warden, lowering his binoculars so as to glut his eyes with the full spectacle. "In fact, it's more than fine, it's glorious!"

He spoke aloud in his enthusiasm. A stout, elderly man who stood near — a man with "retired tradesman" writ large on face and figure — believed that the tall, spare-built yachtsman was praising the weather.

"Yes, sir," he chortled pompously, "this is a reel August day. *I* knew it. Fust thing this morning I tole my missus we was in for a scorcher."

Warden gradually became aware that these ineptitudes were by way of comment. He turned and read the weather-prophet's label at a glance. But life was too gracious at that moment, and he was far too well-disposed toward all men, that he should dream of inflicting a snub.

"That was rather clever of you," he agreed genially. "Now, though the barometer stood high, I personally was dreading a fog three hours ago."

The portly one gurgled.

"I've got a glass," he announced. "Gev' three

pun' ten for it, but there's a barrowmeter in my bones that's worth a dozen o' them things. I'll back rheumatiz an' a side o' bacon any day to beat the best glass ever invented."

All unknowing, here was the touch of genius that makes men listen. Warden showed his interest.

"A side of bacon!" he repeated.

"Yes, sir. Nothing to ekal it. I was in the trade, so I know wot I'm talkin' about. And, when you come to think of it, why not? Pig skin an' salt — one of 'em won't have any truck wi' damp — doesn't want it an' shows it — an' t'other sucks it up like a calf drinkin' milk. I've handled bacon in tons, every brand in the market, an' you can't smoke any of 'em on a muggy day."

"Does your theory account for the old-fashioned notion that pigs can see the wind?"

The stout man considered the point. It was new to him, and he was a Conservative.

"I'm better acquent wi' bacon," he said stubbornly.

"So I gather. I was only developing your very original idea, on the principle that

> "'You may break, you may shatter, the vase if you will,
> But the scent of the roses will hang round it still.'"

The ex-bacon-factor rapped an emphatic stick on the pavement. Though he hoped some of his friends would see him hob-nobbing "with a swell," he refused to be made game of.

"Wot 'as scent got to do with it?" he demanded wrathfully.

"Everything. Believe me, pigs have been used as pointers. And consider the porcine love of flowers. Why, there once was a pig named Maud because it *would* come into the garden."

Had Warden laughed he might have given the cue that was lacking. But his clean-cut, somewhat sallow face did not relax, and an angry man puffed away from him in a red temper.

He caught scraps of soliloquy.

"A pig named Maud! . . . Did anybody ever hear the like? . . . An' becos it kem into a garden. . . . Might just as well 'ave called it Maria."

Then Warden, left at peace with the world, devoted himself again to the exquisite panorama of Cowes on a sunlit Monday of the town's great week. In front sparkled the waters of the Solent, the Bond Street of ocean highways. A breath of air from the west rippled over a strong current sweeping eastward. It merely kissed the emerald plain into tiny facets. It was so light a breeze that any ordinary sailing craft would have failed to make headway against the tide, and the gay flags and bunting of an innumerable pleasure fleet hung sleepily from their staffs and halyards. Yet it sufficed to bring a covey of white-winged yachts flying back to Cowes after rounding the East Lepe buoy. Jackyard topsails and bowsprit spinnakers preened before it. Though almost imperceptible on shore, it awoke these gorgeous butterflies of the sea into life and motion. Huge 23-meter cutters, such as *White Heather II*, *Brynhild* and *Nyria*, splendid cruisers like *Maoona*,

Merrymaid, *Shima*, *Creole*, and *Britomart*, swooped grandly into the midst of the anchored craft as though bent on self-destruction. To the unskilled eye it seemed a sheer miracle that any of them should emerge from the chaos of yachts, redwings, launches, motor-boats, excursion steamers, and smaller fry that beset their path. But Cowes is nothing if not nautical. Those who understood knew that bowsprits and dinghies of moored yachts would be cleared magically, and even spinnaker booms topped to avoid lesser obstruction. Those who did not understand — who heard no syllable of the full and free language that greeted an inane row-boat essaying an adventurous crossing of the course — gazed breathlessly at these wondrous argosies, and marveled at their escape from disaster. Then the white fleet swept past the mouth of the river, and vanished behind Old Castle Point on the way to far distant buoy or light-ship that marked the beginning of the homeward run. And that was all — a brief flight of fairy ships — and Cowes forthwith settled down to decorous junketing.

Away to the northwest a gathering of gray-hulled monsters had thundered a royal salute of twenty-one guns, and the smoke-cloud still lay in a blue film on the Hampshire coast. The *Dreadnought* was hauling at her anchors before taking a king and an emperor to witness the prowess of her gunners. The emperor's private yacht, a half-fledged man-o'-war, was creeping in the wake of the competing yachts. Perchance her

officers might see more of British gunnery practice than of the racing.

Close at hand a swarm of launches and ships' boats buzzed round the landing slip of the Royal Yacht Club. The beautiful lawn and gardens were living parterres of color, for the Castle is a famous rendezvous of well-dressed women. Parties were assembling for luncheon either in the clubhouse or on board the palatial vessels in the roads. To the multitude, yachting at Cowes consists of the blare of a starting-gun, the brief vision of a cluster of yachts careening under an amazing press of canvas, and, for the rest, gossip, eating, bridge — with a picnic or a dance to eke out the afternoon and evening.

Arthur Warden soon turned his back on the social Paradise he was not privileged to enter. He was resigned to the fact that the breeze which sent the competitors in the various matches spinning merrily to Spithead would not move his hired cutter a yard against the tide. So, having nothing better to do, he sauntered along the promenade toward the main street. On the way he passed the one-time purveyor of bacon sitting beside a lady who by long association had grown to resemble him.

"Now I wonder if her name is Maria," he mused.

Drifting with the holiday crowd, he bought some picture postcards, a box of cigarettes, and a basket of hothouse peaches. Being a dilettante in some respects, he admired and became the prospective owner of the fruit before he learned the price. There were four

peaches in the basket, and they cost him ten shillings.

"Ah," he said, as the shopkeeper threw the half sovereign carelessly into the till, "I see you have catered for Lucullus?"

"I don't think so, sir," said the greengrocer affably. "Where does he live?"

"He had villas at Tusculum and Neapolis."

"There's no such places in the Isle of Wight, sir."

"Strange! Has not the game-dealer across the street supplied him with peacocks' tongues?"

The man grinned.

"Somebody's bin gettin' at you, sir," he cried.

"True, very true. Yet, according to Horace, I sup with Lucullus to-night."

"Horace said that, did he?"

The greengrocer suddenly turned and peered down a stairway.

"Horace!" he yelled, "who's this here Lucullus you've bin gassin' about?"

A shock-headed boy appeared.

"Loo who?" said he.

Warden departed swiftly.

"My humor does not appeal to Cowes," he reflected. "I have scored two failures. Having conjured Horace from a coal-cellar let me now confer with Diogenes in his tub."

Applied to Peter Evans, and his phenomenally small dinghy, the phrase was a happy enough description of the ex-pilot who owned the *Nancy*. Evans and his

craft had gone out of commission together. Both were famous in the annals of Channel pilotage, but an accident had deprived Peter of his left leg, so he earned a livelihood by summer cruising round the coast, and he was now awaiting his present employer at a quay in the river Medina.

But Warden's pace slackened again, once he was clear of the fruiterer's shop. Sailing was out of the question until the breeze freshened. It was in his mind to bid Peter meet him again at four o'clock. Meanwhile, he would go to Newport by train, and ramble in Parkhurst Forest for a couple of hours. Recalling that happy-go-lucky mood in later days of storm and stress, he tried to piece together the trivial incidents that were even then conspiring to bring about the great climax of his life. A pace to left or right, a classical quip at his extravagance in the matter of the peaches, a slight hampering of free movement because the Portsmouth ferry-boat happened to be disgorging some hundreds of sightseers into the main street of West Cowes — each of these things, so insignificant, so commonplace, helped to bring him to the one spot on earth where fate, the enchantress, had set her snare in the guise of a pretty girl.

For it was undeniably a pretty face that was lifted to his when a young lady, detaching herself from the living torrent that delayed him for a few seconds on the pavement, appealed for information.

"Will you please tell me how I can ascertain the berth of the yacht *Sans Souci?*" she asked.

It has been seen that he was glib enough of speech, yet now he was tongue-tied. In the very instant that the girl put forward her simple request, his eyes were fixed on the swarthy features of a Portuguese free-booter known to him as the greatest among the many scoundrels infesting the hinterland of Nigeria. There was no mistaking the man. The Panama hat, spotless linen, fashionable suit and glossy boots of a typical visitor to Cowes certainly offered strong contrast to the soiled garb of the balked slave-trader whom he had driven out of a burning and blood-bespattered African village a brief year earlier. But, on that occasion, Arthur Warden had gazed steadily at Miguel Figuero along the barrel of a revolver; under such circumstances one does not forget.

For a little space, then, the Englishman's imagination wandered far afield. Instinctively he raised his hat as he turned to the girl and repeated her concluding words.

"The *Sans Souci*, did you say?"

"Yes, a steam-yacht — Mr. Baumgartner's."

She paused. Though Warden was listening now, his wits were still wool-gathering. His subconscious judgment was weighing Figuero's motives in coming to England, and, of all places, to Cowes. Of the many men he had encountered during an active life this inland pirate was absolutely the last he would expect to meet during Regatta Week in the Isle of Wight.

The girl, half aware of his obsession, became confused — even a trifle resentful.

"I am sorry to trouble you," she went on nervously. "I had no idea there would be such a crowd, and I spoke to you because — because you looked as if you might know ——"

Then he recovered his self-possession, and proceeded to surprise her.

"I *do* know," he broke in hurriedly. "Pray allow me to apologize. The sun was in my eyes, and he permits no competition. Against him, even you would dazzle in vain. To make amends, let me take you to the *Sans Souci*. She is moored quite close to my cutter, and my dinghy is not fifty yards distant."

The girl drew back a little. This offer of service was rather too prompt, while its wording was peculiar, to say the least. She was so good-looking that young men were apt to place themselves unreservedly at her disposal without reference to sun, moon, or stars.

"I think I would prefer to hire a boat," she said coldly. "I should explain that an officer on board the steamer told me I ought to discover the whereabouts of the yacht before starting, or the boatman would take me out of my way and overcharge."

"Exactly. That officer's name was Solomon. Now, I propose to take you straight there for nothing. Come with me as far as the quay. One glance at Peter will restore the confidence you have lost in me."

Then he smiled, and a woman can interpret a man's smile with almost uncanny prescience. The whiff of pique blew away, and she temporized.

"Is the *Sans Souci* a long way out?"

"Nearly a mile. And look! We can eat these while Peter toils."

He opened the paper bag and showed her the peaches. She laughed lightly. Were she a Frenchwoman she would have said, "But, sir, you are droll." Being English, she came to the point.

"Where is the quay you speak of?"

"Here. Close at hand."

As they walked off together she discovered out of the corner of her eye that his glance was searching the thinning mob of her fellow passengers. She guessed that he had recognized some person unexpectedly.

"Are you sure I am not trespassing on your time?" she demanded.

"Quite sure. When I said the sun was in my eyes I used poetic license. I meant the West African sun. A man who arrived on your steamer reminded me of Nigeria — where we — er — became acquainted."

"There! You want to speak to him, of course," and she halted suddenly.

He smiled again, and held out the bag.

"He is a Portuguese gin-trader — and worse. And he is gone. Would you have me run after him and offer peaches that were meant for you?"

"But that is ridiculous."

"Most certainly."

"I don't mean that. How could you possibly have provided peaches for me?"

"I don't know. Ask the fairies who arrange these things. Ten minutes ago I had no more notion of

buying fruit than of buying an aeroplane. Ten minutes ago you and I had never met. Yet here we are, you and I and the luscious four. And there is Peter, sailing master, cook, and general factotem of the *Nancy* cutter. Don't you think Peter's wooden leg induces trust? He calls it a prop, which suggests both moral and physical support. By the way, have you ever noticed that wooden-legged men are invariably fat? And Cæsar vouched for the integrity of fat men."

Though the girl began to find his chatter agreeable, she was secretly dismayed when she compared the gigantic Peter with the diminutive dinghy. She had never before seen so broad a man or so small a boat. But she had grit, and was unwilling to voice her doubt.

"Will it hold us?" she inquired with apparent unconcern.

"Oh, yes. When Peter was a pilot that little craft carried him and his two mates through many a heavy sea. Don't be afraid. We will put you safely on board the *Sans Souci.* Now, you sit there and hold the bag. I'll take my two at once, please, as I find room forrard."

"Not much of a breeze for cruisin', Mr. Warden," grinned Peter, casting an appreciative eye over the latest addition to the *Nancy's* muster-roll.

"We're not bound for a cruise, Peter, worse luck," said Warden. "The young lady wishes to reach that big yacht moored abreast of the cutter. So give way, O heart of oak! Thou wert christened stone, yet a good name is rather to be chosen than great riches."

Peter winked solemnly at the fair unknown.

"He do go on, don't he, miss?" he said.

The girl nodded, for ripe peach is an engrossing fruit. She was enjoying her little adventure. It savored of romance. Already her slight feeling of nervousness had vanished. In her heart of hearts she hoped that Mr. Warden might prove to be a friend of the Baumgartners.

Under Peter's powerful strokes the dinghy sped rapidly into the open waters of the Solent. At that hour there was but slight stir in the roadstead. Everybody afloat seemed to be eating. Each launch and yacht they passed held a luncheon party beneath awnings or in a deck saloon. Through the golden stillness came the pleasant notes of a band playing in the grounds of the clubhouse. A bugle sounded faint and shrill from the deck of a distant warship. Sitting in this cockleshell of a craft, so near the glistening water that one might trail both hands in it, was vastly agreeable after a long journey by rail and steamer. From sea level the girl obtained an entirely different picture of Cowes and the Solent from that glimpsed from the throbbing ferry-boat. The sea appeared to have risen, the wooded hills and clusters of houses to have sunk bodily. Already the shore was curiously remote. A sense of brooding peace fell on her like a mantle. She sighed, and wondered why she was so content.

Peter's airy summary of his master's habits seemed to have cast a spell on their tongues. For fully five minutes no one spoke. The wondrous silence was

broken only by the rhythmical clank of the oars, the light plash of the boat's movement, the strains of a waltz from the Castle lawn, and the musical laughter of women from the yachts.

Owing to the shortness of the dinghy, and the fact that the girl faced Warden, with Peter intervening, the two younger people were compelled to look at each other occasionally. The man saw a sweetly pretty face dowered with a rare conjunction of myosotis blue eyes and purple eyelashes, and crowned with a mass of dark brown hair. Accent, manner, and attire bespoke good breeding. She was dressed well, though simply, in blue canvas. Being somewhat of an artist, he did not fail to note that her hat, blouse, gloves and boots, though probably inexpensive, harmonized in brown tints. She was young, perhaps twenty-two. Guessing at random, he imagined her the daughter of some country rector, and, from recent observation of the Baumgartners, eked out by their public repute, he admitted a certain sentiment of surprise that such blatant parvenus should be on her visiting list.

For her part, the girl had long since discovered that her self-appointed guide was an army man. West Africa gave a hint of foreign service that was borne out by a paleness beneath the tan of the yachtsman. A regimental mess, too, is a university in itself, conferring a well-defined tone, a subtle distinctiveness. Each line of his sinewy frame told of drill, and his rather stern face was eloquent of one accustomed to command.

These professional hall-marks were not lost on her.

She had mixed in circles where they were recognized. And she was prepared to like him. In her woman's phrase, she thought it was "nice of him" not to question her. She was quite sure that if they met again ashore that afternoon he would leave her the option of renewing or dropping their acquaintance as she thought fit. Yet, for one so ready of speech after the first awkward moment outside the steamer pier, it was surprising that he should now be so taciturn.

When he did address her, he kept strictly to the purpose of their expedition.

"That is the *San Souci*," he said, pointing to a large white yacht in the distance. "A splendid vessel. Built on the Clyde, I believe?"

"Ay, three hunnerd tons, an' good for ten knots in any or'nary sea," put in Peter.

"You know her, of course?" went on Warden.

"No. I have never before set eyes on her."

"Well, you will enjoy your visit all the more, perhaps. From last night's indications, you should have plenty of amusement on board."

"Are there many people there, then?"

"I am not sure. The owners gave a big dinner party yesterday. The launch was coming and going at all hours."

"What is that?" she asked inconsequently, indicating with a glance a small round object bobbing merrily westward some few yards away.

"It is difficult to say. Looks like a float broken loose from a fishing net," said Warden.

"No, sir, it ain't that," pronounced Peter. "Nets have corks an' buoys, an' that ain't neether."

"You may think it absurd," cried the girl, "yet I fancied just now that I caught a resemblance to a face, a distorted black face; but it has turned round."

The boatman lay on his oars, and they all looked at the dancing yellow ball hurrying to the open sea.

"At first sight it suggests a piratical pumpkin," said Warden.

"But I have been watching it quite a long time, and I am certain it is black on the other side. There! Surely I am not mistaken. And the people on that yacht have seen it, too."

The girl's face flushed with excitement. The thing had really startled her, and the two men were ready to agree that it now presented a mask-like visage, more than half submerged, as it swirled about in a chance eddy. That some loungers on a yacht close at hand had also noticed it was made evident by their haste to run down a gangway into a boat fastened alongside.

"After it, Peter!" cried Warden. "It is the lady's trover by the law of the high seas. Bend your back for the honor of the *Nancy*. Port a bit — port. Steady all. Keep her there."

In her eagerness, the girl tried to rise to her feet.

"Sit still, miss," growled Peter, laboring mightily. "Judging by the position of that other craft, an' from wot I know of Mr. Warden, there'll be a devil of a bump in 'arf a tick."

"Starboard a point," cooed Warden, on his knees in the bows. "Steady as she goes."

Suddenly he sprang upright.

"Hard a-starboard!" he shouted, and leaped overboard.

A yell from the opposing boat, a scream from the girl, a sharp crack as an oar-blade snapped against the sturdy ribs of the dinghy, and the two boats shot past each other, Peter's prompt obedience to orders having averted a collision.

"My godfather!" he roared, "'e 'ad to jump for it. But don't you worry, miss — 'e can swim like a herrin'."

Nevertheless, the girl did worry, as her white face and straining eyes well showed. Peter swung the dinghy about so nimbly that she lost all sense of direction. It seemed as if the laughing Solent had swallowed Warden, and she gazed affrightedly on every side but the right one.

"Oh, how could he do it?" she wailed. "I shall never forgive myself —"

Then she heard a deep breath from the water behind her, and she turned to see Warden, with blood streaming from a gash across his forehead, swimming easily with one hand. She whisked round and knelt on the seat.

"Quick!" she cried. "Come close. I can hold you."

"Please do not be alarmed on my account," he said coolly. "I fear I look rather ghastly, but the injury is nothing, a mere glancing blow from an oar."

Even in her unnerved condition she could not fail to realize that he was in no desperate plight. But she was very frightened, and grasped his wrist tenaciously when his fingers rested on the stern rail. Yet, even under such trying circumstances, she was helpful. Though half sobbing, and utterly distressed, she dipped her handkerchief in the water and stooped until she could wash the wound sufficiently to reveal its extent. He was right. The skin was broken, but the cut had no depth.

"Why did you behave so madly?" she asked with quivering lips.

"It was method, not madness, fair maid," he said, smiling up at her. "Our opponents had four oars and a light skiff against Peter's two and a dinghy that is broad as it is long. To equalize the handicap I had to jump, else you would have lost your trophy. By the way, here it is!"

With his disengaged hand he gave her a smooth, highly polished oval object which proved to be a good deal larger than it looked when afloat. The girl threw it into the bottom of the boat without paying the least heed to it. She was greatly flurried, and, womanlike, wanted to box Warden's ears for his absurd action.

"You have terrified me out of my wits," she gasped. "Can you manage to climb on board?"

"That would be difficult — perhaps dangerous. Peter, pull up to the nearest ship's ladder. Then I can regain my perch forrard."

But Peter was gazing with an extraordinary expres-

sion of awe, almost of fear, at the unusual cause of so much commotion.

"Well, sink me!" he muttered, "if that ain't Ole Nick's own himmidge, it's his head stoker's. I've never seen anything like it, no, not in all my born days. My aunt! It's ugly enough to cause a riot."

CHAPTER II

HOW THE MESSAGE WAS DELIVERED

Owing to the return of the rival boat, Peter's agitation passed unnoticed. A superior person was apologizing for the accident, though inclined to tax Warden with foolhardiness.

"You have only yourself to blame for that knock on the head, which might have been far more serious than it is," he said.

"Will you kindly go to — Jericho?" said the man in the water.

The superior person's tone grew more civil when he found that he was talking to one whom he condescended to regard as an equal.

"Don't you want any assistance?" he inquired.

"No, thanks, unless you will allow me to use your gangway in order to climb aboard the dinghy."

"By all means. I am sorry the oar caught you. But you annexed the prize, so I suppose you are satisfied. What was it?"

"A calabash, I fancy. You will see it lying in the boat."

Peter, who was really fascinated by the carved face which drew the girl's attention in the first instance,

suddenly kicked it and turned it upside down with his wooden leg. The men in the second boat saw only the glazed yellow rind of an oval gourd, some twelve inches long and eight or nine in diameter.

"The pot was hardly worth the scurry," laughed one of them.

"If Greeks once strove for a crown of wild olive, why not Englishmen for a calabash?" said Warden.

There was an element of the ludicrous in the unexpected comment from a man in his predicament. Every true-born Briton resents any remark that he does not quite understand, and some among the strangers grinned. The girl, still holding Warden's wrist as though she feared he would vanish in the depths if she let go, darted a scornful look at them.

"The truth is that these gentlemen competed because they thought they were sure to win," she cried.

"It was a fair race, madam," expostulated the leader of the yacht's boat.

"Y-yes," she admitted. "My presence equalized matters."

As the men were four to two she scored distinctly.

"Give way, Peter," said Warden. "If I laugh I shall swallow more salt water than is good for me."

He was soon seated astride the bows of the dinghy, which Peter's strong arms brought quickly alongside the *Sans Souci*. By that time, the girl's composure was somewhat restored. Warden obviously made so light of his ducking that she did not allude to it again. As for the gourd, it rested at her feet, but she seemed

to have lost all interest in it. In truth, she was annoyed with herself for having championed her new friend's cause, and thus, in a sense, condoned his folly.

It did not occur to her that the *Sans Souci's* deck was singularly untenanted, until a gruff voice hailed the occupants of the dinghy from the top of the gangway.

"Below there," came the cry. "Wotcher want here?"

The girl looked up with a flash of surprise in her expressive face. But she answered instantly:

"I am Miss Evelyn Dane, and I wish to see Mrs. Baumgartner."

"She's ashore," was the reply.

"Well, I must wait until she returns."

"You can't wait here."

"But that is nonsense. I have come from Oxfordshire at her request."

"It don't matter tuppence where you've come from. No one is allowed aboard. Them's my orders."

Miss Dane turned bewildered eyes on Warden.

"How can one reason with a surly person like this?" she asked.

"He is incapable of reason — he wants a hiding," said Warden.

A bewhiskered visage of the freak variety glared down at him.

"Does he, you swob," roared the apparition, "an' oo's goin' to give it 'im?"

"*I* am. Take this lady to the saloon, and come

with me to the cutter yonder. My man will bring you to your bunk in five minutes, or even less."

"For goodness' sake, Mr. Warden, do not make my ridiculous position worse," cried the girl, reddening with annoyance. "Mrs. Baumgartner wrote and urged me to see her without any delay on board this yacht. I telegraphed her early this morning saying I would be here soon after midday. What *am* I to do?"

"If I were you, I would go back to Oxfordshire," he said.

"But I cannot — at least, not until I have spoken to her. I am — poor. I am practically engaged as companion — another name for governess, I suspect — to Mrs. Baumgartner's daughter, and I dare not throw away the chance of obtaining a good situation."

Warden, who was dabbing his forehead with a handkerchief, did not reply at once, and Evelyn Dane, in her distress, little guessed the irrational conceit that danced in his brain just then. But the presence of Peter, and the torrent of sarcastic objurgation that flowed from the guardian of the *Sans Souci*, imposed restraint. It was on the tip of his tongue to suggest that, under the conditions, it would be a capital notion if they got married, and took a honeymoon cruise in the *Nancy!* — Long afterward he wondered what would have been the outcome of any such fantastic proposal. Would she have listened? At any rate, it amused him at the time to think that there was little difference between a lover and a lunatic.

But he contented himself with saying:

"I fear I am rather light-headed to-day, Miss Dane. Let us appeal to Peter the solid, and draw upon his wide experience. Tell us then, O pilot, what course shall we shape?"

Peter, rapidly restored to the normal by the familiar language coming from the rail of the yacht, glanced up.

"If I was you, sir, I'd ax monkey-face there wot time 'is missis was due aboard. Mebbe the young leddy would find her bearin's then, so to speak."

"Excellent. Do you hear, Cerberus? When does Mrs. Baumgartner return?"

The watchman, taking thought, decided to suspend his taunts.

"Why didn't you ax me that at fust?" he growled. "I'm on'y obeyin' orders. Seven o'clock, they said. An' it didn't matter 'oo kem here, if it was the Pope o' Rome hisself, it's as much as my place is worth to let him aboard."

"That is final, Miss Dane," said Warden. "There are two alternatives before you. I can either gag and bind the person who has just spoken, thus securing by force your admission to the yacht, or I can entertain you on the *Nancy* until seven o'clock."

"But I ought to go ashore."

"It is not to be dreamed of, I assure you. Cowes is overrun with excursionists. You will be much happier with Peter and me, and we are no mean cooks when put on our mettle."

She yielded disconsolately. Dislike of the *Sans Souci* and every one connected with that palatial

vessel was already germinating in her mind. If it were not for the considerations outlined in her brief statement to Warden she would have caught the next ferry to Portsmouth and allowed Mrs. Baumgartner to make other provision for her daughter's companionship, or tuition.

"Give me a call when you are let off the chain," said Warden pleasantly to the watchman, as the dinghy curved apart from the yacht's side.

The girl colored even more deeply. Such behavior was not only outrageous, but it supplied a safety valve for her own ruffled feelings.

"I wish you would not say such stupid things," she cried vehemently. "What would happen if that wretched man took you at your word? You would be mixed up in some horrible brawl, and wholly on my account."

"He will not come, Miss Dane," he said sadly. "Let me explain, however, that I prodded his thick hide with set purpose. He is alone on the *Sans Souci;* he blustered because he was afraid we meant to go aboard, aye or nay. Is it not extraordinary that such a vessel should be absolutely denuded of owner, guests, servants, and crew? That man is not a sailor. Unless I am greatly mistaken, he does not belong to the yacht in any capacity. What does it mean? You may take it from me that it is unusual, I might almost say phenomenal, for a valuable steam-yacht in commission to be deserted in that manner."

"But he admitted that 'they,' meaning Mr. and

Mrs. Baumgartner, I suppose, would return early this evening?"

"I am sure he is right in that. But where are the twenty odd domestics and members of the crew? When Peter and I went ashore at ten o'clock to-day the *Sans Souci* was alive with people."

"I only know that Mrs. Baumgartner seems to have been thoughtless where I am concerned," said the girl, absorbed in her own troubles.

Nevertheless, she brightened considerably when Warden assisted her to reach the spotless deck of the *Nancy*. By dint of much scrubbing and polishing, that taut little cutter had no reason to shirk the vivid sunlight. At the beginning of the cruise she had been fitted with a new suit of sails and fresh cordage. For the rest, Peter, and Peter's fourteen-year-old son "Chris," roused now from sound sleep in the cabin by his father's loud summons, kept brass fittings and woodwork in a spick-and-span condition that would bear comparison with the best-found yacht in the roadstead.

Miss Dane was accommodated with a camp chair aft, while Warden dived into the cabin to change his clothes. The boy, after a wide-eyed stare at his employer, was about to busy himself with tying up the dinghy, when Peter bade him be off and see to the stove if he wished to escape a rope-ending. Chris was hurt. He had not expected such a greeting from his revered parent; but he disappeared instantly, and Peter imagined that his offspring was thus prevented from inves-

tigating the mystery of the gourd, which he took good care to leave in the bottom of the boat.

As for the girl, her mind was occupied to the exclusion of all else by the strange combination of events that brought her a guest on board the *Nancy*. She was not so much perturbed by the absence of Mrs. Baumgartner as by Warden's manifest disapproval of the lady. A railway return ticket, sufficient money in her purse to pay for a room in a hotel, and the existence of a friend of her mother's in Portsmouth, a friend whose good offices might be invoked if necessary, made her independent. But she did not want to go back defeated to Oxfordshire. Her father's carelessness had left her practically at the mercy of a step-mother, who enjoyed the revenue of a fair estate until death. The settlement was not to the liking of either woman, and Evelyn was goaded into an endeavor to escape from it by the knowledge that she was regarded as an interloper in a house that would ultimately come into her possession if she survived the second Mrs. Dane.

The well-paid appointment offered by the Baumgartners was apparently an opening sent by the gods. She had been strongly recommended for the post by a friend, and there seemed to be no reason whatever why it should not prove an ideal arrangement for both parties. Yet Warden, unmistakably a gentleman, if rather eccentric in his ways, evidently did not view the mining magnate's family with favor. That was a displeasing fact. Though she had no personal experience of the section of society which dubs itself the

"smart set," she gathered that the Baumgartners belonged to it, and it was a risky undertaking for a young woman to constitute herself part and parcel of the household of one of its leading members.

Her somewhat serious reverie was interrupted by the grateful scent of cooking that came from a hidden region forward. Warden reappeared in dry clothing. The cut on his forehead was covered with a strip of sticking plaster. He was bareheaded, and a slight powdering of gray in his thick black hair made him look more than his age.

"Our glass and china are of the pilot pattern," he explained, placing a laden tray on the deck, "but we balance deficiencies in these respects by a high tone in our cuisine. To-day's luncheon consists of grilled chicken and bacon, followed by meringues and figs, while the claret was laid down last week in Plymouth."

"I am so hungry that I can almost dispense with the glass and china," she admitted. "But won't you let me help? I am quite domesticated."

"What? Would you rob the cook of his glory? You must eat and admire, and thank the kindly gales that wafted Peter to the Indian Ocean when he was putting in his sea service, because he learned there how to use charcoal in the galley instead of an abominable oil lamp."

"I was born in India," she said with delightful irrelevance.

"Ah, were your people in the army?"

"No. My father was in the Indian Marine. But

he retired when I was two years old — soon after my mother's death. I lost him eight years later, and, having lived thirteen years with a stepmother, I thought it high time to begin to earn my own living."

She fancied that this brief biography might encourage him to speak of the Baumgartners, but Warden's conversation did not run on conventional lines.

"I find your career most interesting," he said. "Now that we know each other so well I want to hear more of you. Promise that you will write every month until early December, and report progress in your new surroundings. Here is my card. A letter to the Universities Club will always reach me."

She read: — "Captain Arthur Warden, Deputy Commissioner, Nigeria Protectorate."

"Why must I stop in December?" she asked, with a smile and a quick glance under her long eyelashes.

"Because I return to Nigeria about that date, and I shall then supply a new address."

"Dear me! Are we arranging a regular correspondence?"

"Your effusions can be absolutely curt. Just the date and locality, and the one word 'Happy' or 'Miserable,' as the case may be."

The arrival of Chris with a grilled chicken created a diversion. Peter had to be summoned from the galley. He explained sheepishly that he thought the meal was of a ceremonious character. They feasted regally, and all went well until the unhappy Chris

asked his father if the vegetable marrow was to be boiled for dinner.

"Wot marrer?" demanded Peter unguardedly.

"The big one in the dinghy."

"By Jove, we have never given a thought to the calabash that created all the rumpus," cried Warden. "What about that black face you saw on it, Miss Dane? I didn't notice it afterwards. Did you?"

"No. I was too excited and frightened. Your son might bring it to us now, Mr. Evans."

"Beggin' your pardon, miss, we'll leave it till you've finished lunch," said Peter, regarding Chris with an eye that boded unutterable things.

"But why, most worthy mariner?" demanded Warden.

"'Cos it's the ugliest phiz that ever grew on a nigger," was the astonishing answer. "It gev' me a fair turn, it did, an' I'm a pretty tough subjec'. It's enough to stop a clock. If the young leddy takes my advice she'll bid me heave it overboard and let it go to the — well, to where it rightly belongs."

"It' s only an old gourd," exclaimed Evelyn, looking from one to the other in amused surprise.

"Peter," said Warden, laughing, "you have whetted our curiosity with rare skill. Come, now. What is the joke?"

"I'm in reel earnest, sir — sink me if I ain't. It's — a terror, that's wot it is."

"Bless my soul, produce it, and let us examine this calabash of parts."

"Not me!" growled Peter, hauling himself upright with amazing rapidity. "Believe me, sir, I 'ope you won't 'ave the thing aboard the *Nancy*. Get forrard, you," he went on, glaring at the open-mouthed Chris. "Start washin' them plates, an' keep yer silly mouth closed, or you'll catch somethin' you can't eat."

There could be no doubt that the usually placid and genial-spoken Peter was greatly perturbed. To avoid further questioning, he stumped off to his quarters in the fore part of the cutter, and swung himself out of sight, while the girl endeavored vainly to estimate how he could squeeze his huge bulk through so small a hatchway.

Warden also stood up.

"After that there is but one course open to us," he said, and drew in the dinghy's painter until he was able to secure the gourd.

He was on his knees when he lifted it in both hands and turned it round to ascertain what it was that had so upset his stout friend. In reviewing his first impressions subsequently, he arrived at the conclusion that close familiarity with the features of the West African negro must have blunted his mind to the true significance of the hideous face that scowled at him from the rounded surface of the calabash. He paid heed only to the excellence of the artist — none to the message of undying hatred of every good impulse in mankind that was conveyed by the frowning brows, the cruel mouth, the beady, snake-like eyes peeping through narrow slits cut in the outer rind. Were not

the lineaments those of a pure negro, he would have imagined that some long-forgotten *doyen* of the Satsuma school had amused himself by concentrating in a human face all that is grotesque and horrible in the Japanese notion of a demon. But there was no doubting the identity of the racial type depicted. Warden could even name the very tribe that supplied the model. A curious crinkled ring that had formed round the gourd near the upper part of its egg-shaped circumference suggested the quoit-shaped ivory ornament worn by the men of Oku. Oku used to be a plague spot in West Africa. It is little better to-day, but its virus is dissipated by British rule.

Warden's kindling glance soon detected other important details. The raised ring, and certain rough protuberances that might have borne a crude likeness to a man's face when the gourd was in its natural state, were utilized with almost uncanny ingenuity to lend high relief to the carving. Indeed, the surface had been but slightly scored with the artist's knife. Half-lowered eyelids, a suggestion of parted lips and broad nostrils, some deep creases across the brutish forehead, and a sinister droop to each corner of the mouth — these deft touches revealed at once the sculptor's restraint and power. The black skin was simulated by a smooth and shining lacquer, the ivory ring by a scraping of the rind that laid bare the yellow pith. No characteristic was over-accentuated. The work offered a rare instance of the art that conceals art.

And Warden felt that none but an artist worthy to

rank with the elect could have conceived and carried out this study of some fierce negro despot. That it was a genuine portrait he did not doubt for a moment. It seemed to him that in its creation hate and fear had gone hand in hand with marvelous craftsmanship. The man who exercised such cunning on the inferior material provided by a rough-coated calabash was not only inspired by the pride of conscious power but meant to leave an imperishable record of a savage tyrant in his worst aspect. A great Italian painter, limning his idea of the Last Judgment, gratified his spite by placing all his enemies among the legion of the lost. This unknown master had taken a more subtle revenge. It was possible that the black chief, had he seen it, would have admired his counterfeit presentment. It demanded a more cultured intelligence than Oku society conferred to enable him to appreciate how plainly an evil soul leered from out a dreadful mask.

In no respect was the truth of the image more convincing than in the treatment of the eyes. A minute mosaic of chalcedony was used to portray white and iris and cornea. Small pieces of clear crystal formed the pupils, and the rays of light glinted from their depths with an effect that was appalling in its realism. Thus might the eyes of a cobra sparkle with vindictive fire. They exercised a diabolical mesmerism. Warden, rapt in his admiration of a genuine work of art, remained wholly unconscious of their spell till he heard a faint gasp of horror from the girl.

He turned and looked at her in quick dismay. All

the roses had fled from her cheeks, leaving her wan indeed. Her own fine eyes were distended with fright. She, like Peter Evans, gave no heed to the consummate skill of the designer. She was fascinated at once by that basilisk glare. It thrilled her to the core, threatened her with immeasurable wrongs, menaced her with the spite of a demon.

"This is the most wonderful thing of its kind I have ever seen," said Warden eagerly.

Though he was not yet awakened to the magnetic influence exercised by the vile visage he could not fail to note the girl's consternation. He thought to reassure her by pointing out the marvelous craft displayed in its contriving.

"It is amazing in every sense," he went on, bringing the gourd nearer for her inspection. "Although the calabash is of a variety unknown in West Africa, the face gives a perfect likeness of an Oku chief. There is a man in Oku now who might have sat to the sculptor, though he is far from possessing the power, the tremendous strength, of the original. Yet it seems to me to be very old. I cannot, for the life of me ——"

A loud crash interrupted him. Chris, removing the remains of the feast, had gazed for an instant at the astounding object in Warden's hands. The boy backed away, and tripped over a coil of rope, with disastrous result to the crockery he was carrying.

Warden's voice, no less than the laugh with which he greeted Chris's discomfiture, restored the poise of the girl's wits.

"You obtained that for me, did you not?" she cried with a curious agitation.

"Yes, of course," said he.

"Then give it to me, please."

He was certainly surprised, but passed the gourd to her without further comment. She half averted her eyes, took it unhesitatingly, and tried to pitch it into the water. For its size, it was astonishingly light. Were it as heavy as she imagined, it must have dropped into the Solent several yards from the vessel. As it was, it flew unexpectedly high, struck a rope, and fell back on deck, whence it bounded, with the irregular bounce of a Rugby football, right into Warden's hands again.

"That was a mad trick," he said almost angrily.

"Oh, please, throw it away," she pleaded.

"Throw away a rare and valuable curio! Why?"

"Because it will bring you nothing but ruin and misery. Can you not see its awful meaning? Throw it away, I implore you!"

"But that would be a crime, the act of a Vandal. It may be the chiefest treasure of a connoisseur's collection. Would you have me ape some fanatic Mussulman hammering to atoms a statue by Phidias?"

"There is no beauty in that monstrous thing. It is — bewitched."

"Oh really, Miss Dane — we are in England, in the twentieth century."

He laughed indulgently, with the air of an elder brother who had forgiven her for an exhibition of

pettish temper. He held out the calabash at arm's length and viewed it critically. He saw immediately that the crown inside the ring was misplaced.

"Hello!" he muttered, "you did some damage, then!"

Closer inspection revealed that the fall had loosened a tightly fitting lid hitherto concealed by the varnish used as a preservative. He removed it, and peered within.

"A document!" he announced elatedly. "Perhaps, after all, your unaccountable frenzy was a blessing in disguise. Now, Miss Dane, we may learn what you termed its 'awful meaning.' But, for pity's sake, don't yield to impulse and rend the manuscript. You have cracked his chiefship's skull — I pray you spare his brains."

CHAPTER III

WHEREIN A STRONG MAN YIELDS TO CIRCUMSTANCES

Curiosity, most potent of the primal instincts, conquered the girl's fear. As it happened, Warden was still kneeling. He sat back on his heels, rested the calabash against his knees, and withdrew a strip of dried skin from its cunningly devised hiding-place. It was so curled and withered that it crackled beneath his fingers when he tried to unfold it. Quite without premeditation, he had placed the calabash in such wise that the negro's features were hidden, and this fact alone seemed to give his companion confidence.

"What is it?" she asked, watching his efforts to persuade the twisted scroll to remain open.

"Parchment, and uncommonly tough and leathery at that."

He did not look up. A queer notion was forming in his mind, and he was unwishful to meet her eyes just then.

"It looks very old," she said.

"A really respectable antique, I fancy. Have you any pins — four, or more?"

She produced from a pocket a small hussif with its store of sewing accessories.

"A genie of the feminine order!" he cried. "I was merely hoping for a supply of those superfluous pins that used to lurk in my sister's attire and only revealed their presence when I tried to reduce her to subjection."

"Oh, you have a sister?"

"Yes — married — husband ranching in Montana."

Meanwhile he was fastening the refractory document to the deck. With patience, helped by half a dozen pins, he managed to smooth it sufficiently to permit of detailed scrutiny. The girl, wholly interested now, knelt beside him. Any observer in a passing boat might have imagined that they were engaged in some profoundly devotional exercise. But the planks were hard. Miss Dane, seeing nothing but wrinkled parchment, yellow with age, and covered with strange scrawls that seemed to be more a part of the actual material than written on its surface, soon rose.

"Those hieroglyphics are beyond my ken," she explained.

"They are Arabic," said Warden — "Arabic characters, that is. The words are Latin — at least to some extent. *Epistola Pauli Hebraicis* has the ring of old Rome about it, even if it wears the garb of Mahomet."

He straightened himself suddenly, and shouted for Chris with such energy that the girl was startled.

Chris popped his head out of the fore hatch, and was told to bring his father's Bible, for Peter read two of its seven hundred odd pages each day in the year.

Warden compared book and scroll intently during many minutes. Miss Dane did not interrupt. She

contented herself with a somewhat prolonged investigation of Warden's face, or so much of it as was visible. Then she turned away and gazed at the *Sans Souci*. There was a wistful look in her eyes. Perhaps she wished that circumstances had contrived to exchange the yacht for the pilot-boat. At any rate, she was glad he had a sister. If only she had a brother! — just such a one!

At last the man's deep, rather curt voice broke the silence.

"I have solved a part of the puzzle, Miss Dane," he announced. "My Latinity was severely tried, but the chapter and verse gave me the English equivalent, and that supplied the key. Some one has that — some one has written here portions of the 37th and 38th verses of the eleventh chapter of St. Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews. Our version runs: 'They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword . . . they wandered in deserts and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.' The remainder of the text is in yet another language — Portuguese, I imagine — but my small lore in that tongue is of no avail. In any case my vocabulary could not possibly consort with the stately utterances of St. Paul, as it consists mainly of remarks adapted to the intelligence of a certain type of freebooter peculiar to the West African hinterland."

"What do you make of it all?" she asked.

"At present — nothing. It is an enigma, until I secure a Portuguese-English dictionary. Then I shall

know more. Judging by appearances, the message, whatsoever it may be, is complete."

"What sort of skin is that?"

He lifted his eyes slowly. She was conscious of a curious searching quality in his glance that she had not seen there before.

"It is hard to say," he answered. And, indeed, he spoke the literal truth, being fully assured that the shriveled parchment pinned to the deck had once covered the bones of a white man.

"The writing is funny, too," she went on, with charming disregard for the meaning of words.

"It is pricked in with a needle and Indian ink," he explained. "That is an indelible method," he continued hurriedly, seeing that she was striving to recall something that the phrase reminded her of, and here was a real danger of the suggestive word which had so nearly escaped his lips being brought to her recollection. "You see, I have been able to identify the gentleman who served the artist as model," and he tapped the gourd lightly. "Therefore, I am sure that this comes from a land where pen and ink were unknown in the days when some unhappy Christian fashioned such a quaint contrivance to carry his screed."

"Some unhappy Christian!" she repeated. "You mean that some European probably fell into the hands of West African savages years and years ago, and took this means of safeguarding a secret?"

"Who can tell?" he answered, picking up the calabash and gazing steadfastly at the malignant visage

thus brought again into the full glare of the sun. "This fellow can almost speak. If only he could ——"

"Oh, don't," wailed the girl. "My very heart stops beating when I see that dreadful face. Please put it away. If you will not throw it overboard, or smash it to atoms, at least hide it."

"Sorry," he said gruffly, fitting the loose lid into its place. He disliked hysterical women, and, greatly to his surprise, Evelyn Dane seemed to be rather disposed to yield to hysteria.

"The more I examine this thing the more I am bewildered," he went on, endeavoring to cover his harshness by an assumption of indifference. "Where in the world did this varnish come from? It has all the gloss and smooth texture and absence of color that one finds on a genuine Cremona violin. The man who mixed it must have known the recipe lost when Antonio Stradivarius died. Are you good at dates?"

The suddenness of the question perplexed her.

"Do you mean the sort of dates that one acquired painfully at school?" she asked. "If so, I can give you the year of the Battle of Hastings or the signing of Magna Charta."

"The period of a great artist's career is infinitely more important," he broke in. "Stradivarius was at the height of his fame about 1700. Now, if this is the varnish he and Amati and Guarnerius used, we have a shadowy clue to guide us in our inquiry."

"Please don't include me in the quest," she said decisively. "I refuse to have anything to do with it.

Leave the matter to me, and that nasty calabash floats off toward the Atlantic or sinks in the Solent, exactly as the fates direct. Positively, I am afraid of it."

"I really meant to take it out of your sight when I caught a glint of the varnish," he pleaded.

But his humility held a spice of sarcasm. Rising, he tucked the gourd under his coat. He was half-way down the hatch when his glance fell on the little square of skin on the deck. Already the heat of the sun had affected it, and two of the pins had given way. He came back.

"I may as well remove the lot while I am about it," he said, stooping to withdraw the remaining pins.

"Oh, I am not to be frightened by *that*," she cried, with a pout that was reminiscent of the school-girl period.

He laughed, but suppressed the quip that might have afforded some hidden satisfaction.

"Gourd and document are much of a muchness," he said carelessly.

The parchment curled with unexpected speed, and caught his fingers in an uncanny grip. Without thinking what he was doing, he shook it off as though it were a scorpion. Then, flushing a little, he seized it, and stuffed it into a pocket. Miss Dane missed no item of this by-play. But she, too, could exercise the art of self-repression, and left unuttered the words that her heart dictated. Being a methodical person, she gathered the pins and replaced them in the hussif. She had just finished when Warden returned.

"You don't mean to say ——" he began, but checked himself. After all, if he harped on the subject, there was some risk that the girl's intuition might read a good deal of the truth into what she had seen and heard during the past half-hour. So he changed a protest into a compliment.

"Economy is the greatest of the domestic virtues. Now, a mere man would have waited until one of those pins stuck into his foot as he was crossing the deck for his morning dip, and then he would say things. By the way, Peter believes the breeze is freshening. Would you care for a short cruise?"

A delightful color suffused the girl's face. "I feel like lifting my eyebrows at my own behavior," she said, "but I must admit that I should enjoy it immensely. Please bring me back here before six o'clock. I wish to go on board the *Sans Souci* the moment Mrs. Baumgartner arrives."

In response to Warden's summons, Peter and Chris appeared on deck. The *Nancy* cast off from her buoy, her canvas leaped to the embrace of the wind, and soon she was slipping through the water at a spanking pace in the direction of Portsmouth and the anchored fleet, for the cutter could move when her sails filled.

Thenceforth the talk was nautical. Peter entertained them with details of the warships or the yachts competing in the various races. Once, by chance, the conversation veered close to West Africa, when Warden gave a vivid description of the sensations of the novice who makes his first landing in a surf-boat.

But Peter soon brought them back to the British Isles by his reminiscences of boarding salt-stained and sooty tramps in an equinoctial gale off Lundy. No unpleasing incident marred a perfect afternoon until tea was served, and the cutter ran to her moorings.

The guardian Gorgon of the *Sans Souci* watched their return, and it was evident that his solitary vigil was still unbroken. About half-past six, when a swarm of yachts were beating up the roads on the turn of the tide, a steam launch approached the *Sans Souci* and deposited a lady and gentleman on the gangway. They were alone. The watchman helped them to reach the deck, a financial transaction took place between him and the gentleman, the latter disappeared instantly, and the watchman descended the ladder with the evident intention of entering the launch.

But he hesitated, and pointed to the *Nancy*, whereupon the lady, to whom he was speaking, looked fixedly at the cutter and her occupants.

"That is Mrs. Baumgartner, I am sure," said Evelyn eagerly. "Will you take me across in the dinghy at once? Then, if necessary, I can reach Portsmouth easily this evening, as I shall have gained half an hour."

She gave no heed to the astounding fact that if these people were really the yacht-owner and his wife they were absolutely alone on the vessel. Warden, unwilling to arouse distrust in her mind, bade Peter draw the dinghy alongside.

"Good-by," he said, extending his hand frankly.

"The world is small, and we shall meet again. Remember, you have promised to write, and, in the meantime, do not forget that if the *Nancy* or her crew can offer you any service we are within hailing distance."

"You are not leaving Cowes to-night, then?"

"No. To-morrow, if the wind serves, we go east, to Brighton and Dover, and perhaps as far north as Cromer. After that, to Holland. But no matter where I am, I manage to secure my letters."

Evelyn gave his hand a grateful little pressure. She was not insensible of the tact that sent Peter as her escort.

"You have been exceedingly good and kind to me," she said. "I shall never forget this most charming day, and I shall certainly write to you. Good-by, Chris. Good-by, dear little ship. What a pity —" she paused and laughed with pretty embarrassment. "I think I was going to say what a pity it is that these pleasant hours cannot last longer — they come too rarely in life."

And with that she was gone, though she turned twice during her short voyage, and waved a hand to the man who was looking at her so steadily while he leaned against the cutter's mast and smoked in silence.

There could be no doubt that the lady on the *Sans Souci* was Mrs. Baumgartner. No sooner did she realize that Miss Dane's arrival was imminent than she threw up her hands with a Continental affectation of amazement and ran into the deck cabin. To all

seeming, she bade the launch await further orders. Baumgartner and his wife reappeared, they indulged in gesticulations to which Warden could readily imagine an accompaniment of harsh-sounding German, and, evidently as the outcome of their talk, the launch steamed away.

Warden smiled sourly.

"If those people had committed a murder on board, and were anxious to sink their victim several fathoms deep before anybody interfered with them, they could hardly be more excited," he thought. "Perhaps it won't do my young friend any good if I remain here staring straight at the yacht."

He busied himself with an unnecessary stowing away of the cutter's mainsail, but contrived to watch events sufficiently to note that Mrs. Baumgartner received her guest with voluble courtesy. Baumgartner, a French-polished edition of the bacon-factor type of man, bustled the two ladies out of sight, and thenceforth, during more than an hour, the deck of the *Sans Souci* was absolutely untenanted.

Twilight was deepening; lights began to twinkle on shore; not a few careful captains showed riding lamps, although the precaution was yet needless; launches and ships' boats were cleaving long black furrows in the slate-blue surface of the Solent as they ferried parties of diners from shore or yachts — but never a sign of life was there on board the *Sans Souci*. Peter, undisturbed by speculations anent the future of the young lady whose presence had brightened the deck

of the *Nancy* during the afternoon, cooked an appetizing supper. He was surprised when Warden expressed a wish that they should eat without a light. It did not occur to him that his employer was mounting guard over the Baumgartners' yacht, and meant to have a clear field of vision while a shred of daylight remained.

The progress of the meal was rudely broken in on by Peter himself. Although the placid silence of the night was frequently disturbed by the flapping of propellers, his sailor's ear caught the stealthy approach of the one vessel that boded possible danger. Swinging himself upright he roared:

"Where's that ugly Dutchman a-comin' to? Quick with a light, Chris, or she'll be on top of us!"

It was the Emperor's cruiser-yacht that had so suddenly upset his equanimity. Returning to Cowes after convoying the yacht flotilla, she was now fully a mile away from her usual anchorage. But the *Nancy* was safe enough. The imperial yacht stopped at a distance of three cables' lengths, reversed her engines, let go an anchor, and ran up to the chain hawser when the hoarse rattle of its first rush had ceased.

Chris lost no time in producing a lantern, and his father slung it in its proper place.

"It 'ud be just our luck if we wos run down," Warden heard him mutter. "That nigger's phiz we shipped to-day is enough to sink any decent craft, blow me, if it ain't!"

Warden, whose vigil had not relaxed for an instant,

saw that some one was hoisting a masthead light on the *Sans Souci*. Her starboard light followed, and soon the yellow eyes of a row of closed ports stared at him solemnly across the intervening water. As the principal living-rooms of such a vessel must certainly be the deck saloons, he was more than ever puzzled by the eccentric behavior of her owners. Every other yacht in the roadstead was brilliantly illuminated. The *Sans Souci* alone seemed to court secrecy.

It has been seen that, in holiday mood, he was a creature of impulse, nor did he lack the audacity of prompt decision when it was called for. He showed both qualities now by hauling the dinghy alongside and stepping into it.

"Goin' ashore, sir?" cried the surprised Peter.

They kept early hours on board, and Warden's usual habit was to be asleep by half-past nine when the cutter was at her moorings.

"No. I mean to pay a call. Got a match?"

"Let me take you, sir."

"No need, thanks. I'm bound for the *Sans Souci*. I may be back in five minutes."

He lit a cigar, cast off, and rowed himself leisurely toward the vessel which had filled so large a space in his thoughts ever since he met Evelyn Dane in the street outside the steamer pier. His intent was to ask for her, to refuse to go away unless he spoke to her, and, when she appeared, as his well-ordered senses told him would surely be the case, to frame some idle excuse for the liberty he had taken. She had talked

of returning to Portsmouth that evening, and it might serve if he expressed his willingness to carry her imaginary luggage from the quay to the railway station. She was shrewd and tactful. She would understand, perhaps, that he was anxious for her welfare, and it would not embarrass her to state whether or not his services were needed.

He was nearing the yacht when the red and green eyes of a launch gleamed at him as he glanced over his shoulder to take measure of his direction. There was no other vessel exactly in line with the *Sans Souci*, and the thought struck him that this might be the messenger of the gods in so far as they busied themselves with Miss Dane's affairs. There was no harm in waiting a few minutes, so he altered the dinghy's course in such wise that the launch, if it were actually bound for the yacht, must pass quite closely, though he, to all outward seeming, was in no way concerned with its destination. His guess was justified. While the tiny steamer was still fifty yards distant, the quick pulsation of her engines slackened. She drew near, and the figure of a sailor with a boat-hook in his hands was silhouetted against the last bright strip of sky in the northwest. She passed, and it demanded all Arthur Warden's cool nerve to maintain a steady pull at the oars and smoke the cigar of British complacency when he saw Miguel Figuero and three men of the tribe of Oku seated in the cushioned space aft.

He could not be mistaken. He knew the West African hinterland so well that he could distinguish

The presence of Figuero in Cowes was perplexing

the inhabitants of different districts by facial characteristics slight in themselves but as clearly visible to the eye of experience as the varying race-marks of a Frenchman and a Norwegian. Coming thus strangely on the heels of the discovery of that amazing calabash, the incident was almost stupefying. The presence of Figuero alone in Cowes was perplexing — the appearance of three Oku blacks was a real marvel — that all four should be visitors to the *Sans Souci* savored of necromancy. But Warden did not hesitate. He made certain that the strange quartette were being conveyed to the yacht; he took care to note that their arrival was expected, seeing that Baumgartner himself came down the gangway with a lantern to light the way on board; and then he pulled back to the *Nancy*. Ere he reached her, the launch had gone shoreward again.

"You've changed your mind, sir," was Peter's greeting.

"You were keeping a lookout, then?" said Warden.

"'Ave nothin' else to do, so to speak, sir."

"Well, jump in and take the oars. I shall be with you in a moment."

Warden dived into the small cabin, rummaged in a box, and produced two revolvers. He examined both weapons carefully under the cutter's light, and ascertained that they were properly loaded, whereupon one went into each of the outer pockets of his coat.

"Now take me to the *Sans Souci*, Peter," he said. "When I reach the gangway, pull off a couple of lengths, and stand by."

"What's doin'?" asked Peter, who was by no means unobservant.

"Nothing, I hope. I may have to talk big, and twelve ounces of lead lend weight to an argument. But I am puzzled, Peter, and I hate that condition. You remember our nigger friend on the gourd?"

"Remember 'im. Shall I ever forget 'im?" — and the ex-pilot spat.

"Well, three live members of his tribe, and the worst Portuguese slave-trader and gin-runner now known in West Africa, have just boarded the *Sans Souci*. I don't consider them fit company for Miss Dane. What do *you* say?"

Peter hung on the oars.

"W'y not let Chris come an' look after the dinghy?" he said. "You may need a friendly hand w'en the band plays."

Warden laughed.

"We are in England, Peter," he replied; but the words had a far less convincing sound in his ears now than when he protested against Evelyn Dane's unreasoning detestation of the carved gourd. One of the weapons in his pockets was actually resting on the crackling skin of a man who had been flayed alive — and most probably so flayed by ancestors of the negroes who were on board the *Sans Souci* at that instant. The thought strengthened his determination to see and speak to the girl that night. At all costs he would persevere until she herself assured him that she had no wish to go ashore. He even made up his mind

to persuade her to return to Portsmouth for the night, and it seemed to him that no consideration could move him from his purpose.

Whereat Lachesis, she who spins the thread of life, must have smiled. Short as was the distance to be traversed by the dinghy under the impetus of Peter Evans's strong arms, the cruel goddess who pays no regard to human desires had already contrived the warp and weft of circumstances that would deter even a bolder man than Warden from thrusting himself unbidden into the queer company gathered on the yacht.

The pilot was pulling straight to the gangway when a large steam launch whistled an angry warning that he was crossing her bows. He twisted the dinghy broadside on, and both Warden and he saw two officers in the uniform of a foreign navy step on to the *Sans Souci* gangway, where Baumgartner, bare-headed and obsequious of manner, was standing to receive them.

The *Nancy's* boat was so near that her occupants could hear the millionaire's words distinctly as he greeted the first of his two latest visitors. He spoke in German, and Peter was none the wiser, but Warden understood, and his errant fears for Evelyn Dane's welfare were promptly merged in a very ocean of bewilderment.

"The *Nancy* for us, Peter," he murmured. "As they say in the States, I have bitten off more than I can chew. Do you know who that is?"

"Which? — the little one?"

"Yes."

"Mebbe he's the skipper of the Dutchman yonder. That's her launch."

"He is skipper of many Dutchmen. Mr. Baumgartner addressed him as 'emperor.' Give way, Peter. We must watch and eke pray, but there are affairs afoot — or shall I say afloat — that it behooves not a simple official in the Nigeria Protectorate to meddle with. God wot! I have earned a captaincy and a year's leave by serving my country in a humble capacity. Let me not lose both by an act of *lèse majesté*, and it would be none else were I to break in on the remarkable conclave now assembled on board the *Sans Souci!*"

CHAPTER IV

FIGUERO MAKES A DISCOVERY

"You don't mean to say ——" gasped Peter.

"I do. And the less notice we attract during the next five minutes the better I shall be pleased. Bear away to the nearest yacht, and let me apologize for being late."

So, if there were eyes on board the *Sans Souci* that paid heed to aught save the coming of an august visitor, they would have seen nothing more remarkable than a small boat visiting at least two vessels in seemingly unsuccessful quest of one among the hundreds of yachts in the roadstead.

Following a devious route, the dinghy reached the cutter from the port side. Warden secured a pair of night binoculars, seated himself on the hatch, and mounted guard over the *Sans Souci*. The cruiser's launch was still alongside, and the time passed slowly until the two officers descended the gangway and were borne swiftly in the direction of the Royal Yacht Club landing-slip. They had been on board three-quarters of an hour.

There was now so little movement afloat that the pulsation of the screw could be heard until it was quite

near the private pier. Finally it was dominated by the strains of the Castle band beginning the evening programme with the "Boulanger March," and Warden smiled as he thought how singularly inappropriate the lively tune must sound in the ears of the potentate hurrying shoreward.

The band broke off abruptly; after a brief pause it struck up again.

"The King, Gord bless 'im!" said Peter loyally.

"No. That is not for the King. They are playing *Heil dir im Sieger Krantz*," said Warden, still peering at the *Sans Souci*.

"Well, it's the fust time I've ever heerd 'Gord save the King' called *that*," expostulated the pilot.

"Same tune, different words."

Peter sniffed in his scorn.

"They'll be sayin' the Old Hundredth is a Dutch hornpipe next," he growled.

The Prussian National hymn might have acted as a tocsin to Mr. Baumgartner, for a light was hoisted forthwith over the poop of the *Sans Souci*, and Warden discerned the tall forms of the three West African natives standing near the tubby man who manipulated rope and pulley. Figuero was not visible at first. Warden began to be annoyed. Could it be possible that such a social outcast could be left in Evelyn Dane's company? Developments soon relieved the tension. A launch puffed up and took away the visitors, Figuero being the last to step on board. The noisy little vessel was succeeded by two boats filled

with sailors and servants. Within a few minutes the yacht's officers arrived, the deck saloons were brilliantly illuminated, and the *Sans Souci* became a jeweled palace like unto the host of her congeners in the Solent.

By this time Peter was as interested as his employer in the comings and goings of their neighbors.

"There's more in that than meets the eye, Mr. Warden," he said, rolling some tobacco between his palms preparatory to filling his pipe.

"Yet a good deal has met our eyes to-night," was the quiet answer.

Peter worked his great hands methodically. He was not a man of many words; and when he expressed an opinion it was the outcome of calm deliberation.

"Tell me who them niggers an' the other party wos, an' I'll do some fair guessin'," he said. "Rum thing, too, that such a gazebo as that murderous-lookin' swab on the calabash should cross our course just when it did. W'ere did it come from — that's wot I want to know. Has there bin an earthquake? If looks count for anythink, it might have risen straight up from ——"

"Peter," broke in Warden, "I hope Chris is in bed?"

The pilot laughed.

"Time we wos, too, sir. May I ax w'ere his black nibs is stowed?"

"Among my traps. Forget it. I shall send it to London in the morning."

"An' a good job to be rid of it. I've seen some

queer fish in the sea, from bottle-nosed whales an' sharks to dead pigs who 'ad cut their own throats with their fore feet by swimmin' from a wrecked ship, but never before 'ave I clapped my peepers on a fizzy-mahog like that."

Twice had an unusually long speech betrayed his irate sentiment. He was deeply stirred. Warden, smoking and listening in silence, but never relaxing his vigilant scrutiny of the *Sans Souci*, felt that, in very truth, there must be some malign influence in the carved head on the gourd ere it would arouse the intense repugnance of two such different natures as those of the bluff, good-tempered sailor and the dainty, well-bred girl who had come so suddenly into his life.

He did not pursue the conversation. Though Evans was quite trustworthy, there was no need to make him a confidant in matters which might have the gravest bearing on an already troubled position in West Africa. The pilot's carefully charged pipe was nearly empty when Warden surprised him with an abrupt question.

"What time does the first train leave for London in the morning?"

"Round about seven o'clock," he said.

"You ain't thinkin' of chuckin' the cruise, I hope, sir," he went on, and the dejection in his voice showed that he was prepared for the worst.

"For a few hours, perhaps a night — that is all."

"So you b'lieve they mean mischief?" growled Peter, jerking a thumb toward the yacht.

This direct and forcible reasoning was unexpected. Yet any level-headed man might have reached practically the same conclusions from the night's happenings. They were clear enough to one versed in most of the intricacies and pitfalls of West African politics, nor did Warden endeavor to evade the point.

"I believe that there are people in London who should know what you and I know," he said slowly. "Anyhow, let us turn in. Miss Evelyn Dane evidently sleeps on board. Perhaps the morning's light may dispel some of the vapors that cloud our brains tonight."

The early train from Cowes did not, however, carry Arthur Warden among the London-bound passengers.

A glimpse of Evelyn on the deck of the *Sans Souci* altered that portion of his plans. She waved a pleasant greeting, held up both hands with the fingers spread widely apart, and nodded her head in the direction of the town. He took the gesture to mean that she was going ashore at ten o'clock, and he signaled back the information that he would precede her at nine. Not until he found himself dawdling on the quay, killing time as lazily as possible, did the thought obtrude that he was extraordinarily anxious to meet her again. Of course, it irritated him. A smart soldier, with small means beyond his pay — with a foot just planted on the first rung of the administrator's ladder in a land where life itself is too often the price asked for higher climbing — he had no business to

show any undue desire to cultivate the acquaintance of young ladies so peculiarly eligible as Evelyn Dane. He knew this so well that he scoffed at the notion, put two knuckles between his lips, and emitted a peculiarly shrill and compelling whistle.

For its special purpose — the summoning of a boy selling newspapers — it was a sure means toward an end. It drew the boy's attention, even evoked his envy. But it chanced also to be a krooboy call on the Upper Niger, and in that capacity it brought a lean, swarthy face to the window of a bedroom in a quiet hotel overlooking the quay.

Señor Miguel Figuero looked annoyed at first. His dark, prominent eyes searched the open space for one of the negroes whom he expected to find there, but his wrathful expression changed to blank incredulity when he saw Warden. The phase of sheer unbelief did not last long. He darted out of the room, and rapped sharply on a neighboring door.

"O Loanda, M'Wanga! you fit for get up one-time," he shouted.

Crossing the corridor, he roused another dusky gentleman, Pana by name, with the same imperative command. Soon the four were gathered at a window and gazing at Warden.

"Dep'ty Commissioner Brass River lib," whispered the Portuguese eagerly. "You savvy — him dat was in Oku bush las' year. Him captain Hausa men. You lib for see him."

"O Figuero," said one of the negroes, seemingly

their leader, "I plenty much savvy. I see him palaver in village."

"S'pose we fit for catch 'im?" suggested another.

"That fool talk here," growled Figuero. "You lib for see him to-day — then we catch him bush one-time. I hear him give boat-boy whistle. Stick your eyes on him, you pagans, an' don't you lib for forget — savvy?"

They grunted agreement. The West African bush-man has to depend almost exclusively on his five senses for continued existence, and there was little doubt that Arthur Warden would be recognized by each man at any future date within reason, no matter what uniform he wore, or how greatly his features might be altered by hardship or fever.

"Why he lib for dis place?" asked Loanda, the chief, who remembered Warden's part in the suppression of a slave-raid and the punishment subsequently inflicted on those who aided and abetted it.

"No savvy — yet. I lib for watch — then I savvy," said the Portuguese.

"O Figuero, I fit for chop," murmured Pana, who found little amusement in gazing idly at an Englishman through a window when there were good things to eat in the hotel.

"All right. Go an' chop, but remain in room till I come. Then I dash you one quart gin."

Pana grinned.

"I chop one-time," he said, and, indeed, the three

looked as though they could tackle a roasted sheep comfortably.

Meanwhile, Warden opened his paper and took more interest than usual in the news. He learned that the emperor dined on board the imperial yacht and subsequently visited the Castle, being accompanied by Count von Rippenbach as *aide-de-camp*.

Warden did not pretend to have more than a passing knowledge of foreign politics, but he noted the name, the Count having undoubtedly been a party to the conference on the *Sans Souci*.

Another paragraph was of more immediate import, inasmuch as it tended to solve the mystery of the calabash. It ran:

"The emperor's yacht, after watching the British fleet at gun practice off Selsey Bill yesterday, returned to the island and followed the racers during several hours. An alarming incident occurred when rounding the Foreland. Though a course was laid close in-shore, both charts and lead showed ten fathoms of water. Suddenly the cruiser struck. At first it was believed that she had run into some unknown sandbank formed by a recent gale, but examination revealed that she had collided with a sunken wreck, invisible even at low-water spring tide. No damage whatever was done to the stately vessel, which continued the cruise after a delay of a few minutes.

"A Sandown gentleman, passing the same spot later in his launch, found some floating wreckage. The pieces he brought ashore are believed to be parts

of a ship dating back at least a couple of centuries, as there is no record within modern times of any wooden ship foundering in the locality. The gentleman in question decided to mark the exact spot with a buoy, and a diver's services will be requisitioned when tide and weather are suitable, so there is some possibility that a number of antiques, together with a quantity of very old timber, will be recovered."

Warden read the item twice. He found that the emperor was not on board his own yacht at the time. The remainder of the newspaper was dull. He threw away all but the page referring to Cowes, which he stuffed in a pocket, and, although he held his nerves under good control, he almost swore aloud when his fingers touched the roll of skin, whose very existence he had forgotten for the hour.

The minutes passed slowly until a gig from the *Sans Souci* deposited Miss Dane on the wharf.

Not wishing to become known to any of the yacht's people if he could possibly avoid it, Warden strolled away a little distance as soon as the boat appeared in the Medina. Figuero, whose eyes had never left him for an instant since he emitted the telltale whistle, hurried to the door of the hotel and narrowly escaped being discovered when Warden turned on his heel.

The Portuguese, an expert tracker in the bush, was out of his element in Cowes, but he managed to slip out of sight in good time. He was safer than he imagined. Warden was looking at Evelyn Dane, and she made a pretty enough picture on this fine sum-

mer's day to keep any man's glance from wandering.

It gave him a subtle sense of joy to note the unfeigned pleasure of her greeting. Her face mantled with a slight color as she held out her hand.

"I am on my way home," she cried, "but my train does not leave for half an hour. It is so good of you to wait here. I was dreading that you might row across to the yacht — not because I did not want to see you again, but Mr. Baumgartner made such a point of excluding me from any knowledge of his visitors last night that he would be positively ill if he guessed I had friends on board the *Nancy*."

"And Mrs. Baumgartner ——"

"She is a dear creature, but much in awe where her husband's business affairs are concerned. She and I passed the evening together. She would not hear of my departure, but she warned me not to say a word about my afternoon's adventures. Mr. Baumgartner is of a nervous disposition. I suppose he thinks all the world is watching him because he is a rich man."

"There is method in his madness this time," laughed Warden. "Let me tell you quite candidly that if some one told him my name and occupation and added the information that I kept a close eye on the *Sans Souci* between the hours of 5.30 and 9 P.M. last night, he, being of plethoric habit, would be in danger of apoplexy."

They were walking to the station. Evelyn, unable

to decide whether or not to take his words seriously, gave him a shy look.

"You knew I was safe on board," she said.

For some reason, the assumption that he was thinking only of her caused the blood to tingle in Warden's veins.

"That is the nicest thing you could have said," he agreed, and she in turn felt her heart racing.

"Of course you are very well aware that I did not imagine you might not be differently occupied," she protested.

"Let us not quarrel about meanings. You were delightfully right. It is the simple fact that before you were many minutes in the *Sans Souci's* cabin — by the way, where were you?"

"In Mrs. Baumgartner's state-room."

"Ah. Well — to continue — I was nearly coming to take you away, *vi et armis*."

"But why?"

"You have no idea whom Mr. Baumgartner was entertaining?"

"None."

"The first person to reach the *Sans Souci* after yourself was the Portuguese land-pirate I mentioned to you yesterday. He was accompanied by three chiefs of the men of Oku. Do you recollect my description of the mask on the gourd?"

She uttered a startled little cry.

"Are you in earnest?" was all she could find to say.

"I was in deadly earnest about eight o'clock last evening, I assure you. Had it not been for a most amazing intervention you would certainly have heard me demanding your instant appearance on deck."

"Then what happened?"

"I must begin by admitting that I was worried about you. I got into the dinghy, intending to see you on some pretext. A launch containing this precious gang crossed my bows, and I returned to the *Nancy* to — to secure Peter's assistance. We were near the *Sans Souci* on the second trip when another launch arrived, and there stepped on board the yacht a gentleman whose presence assured me that you, at least, were safe enough. You will credit that element in a strained situation when I tell you that the latest arrival was the emperor."

"The Emperor!" she almost gasped. "Do you mean ——"

"Sh-s-s-h! No names. If walls have ears, we are surrounded by listeners. But I am not mistaken. I saw him clearly. I heard Baumgartner's humble greeting. And the really remarkable fact is that Peter and you and I share a very important state secret."

"I — I don't understand," she said, bewildered.

"Of course you don't. Not many people could guess why the most powerful monarch on the Continent of Europe should wish to confer with four of the ripest scoundrels that the West African hinterland can produce. Nevertheless, it is true."

"Then that is why Mrs. Baumgartner kept me closeted in her state-room nearly two hours?"

"Yes. By the way, has she engaged you?"

"Yes. She was exceedingly kind. The terms and conditions are most generous. I rejoin the yacht and meet her daughter at Milford next Wednesday. Then we go to Scotland for some shooting, and the *Sans Souci* returns to Portsmouth to be refitted for a cruise to Madeira and the Canaries during the winter months. Altogether, she sketched a very agreeable programme. But you have excited my curiosity almost beyond bounds by your description of the goings-on last night. My share of the important state secret you spoke of is very slight. It consists in being wholly ignorant of it. Can you enlighten me?"

"There is no reason why I should not. It will invest the Baumgartners with a romantic nimbus which, judging solely from observations, might otherwise be lacking."

The girl laughed.

"They are pleasant people, but rather commonplace," she said.

"Well, we can talk freely in the train."

"You are not leaving Cowes this morning on my account?"

Perhaps her voice showed a degree of restraint. Though she was beginning to like Captain Arthur Warden more than she cared to admit even to herself, he must not be allowed to believe that their friendship could go to extremes.

"If you don't mind enduring my company as far as Portsmouth, I propose to inflict it on you," he explained good-humoredly. "Circumstances compel me to visit London to-day. Chris is now waiting at the station with my bag. I would have left the island by the first train had I not been lucky enough to see you earlier and interpret your signal correctly."

"I only intended to tell you ——"

"The time you would come ashore. Exactly. Why are you vexed because we are fellow-travelers till midday?"

"I am not vexed. I am delighted."

"You expressed your delight with the warmth of an iceberg."

"Now you are angry with me."

"Furious. But please give me your well-balanced opinion. If peaches are good in the afternoon should they not be better in the morning?"

"I *could* eat a peach," she admitted.

Figuero, who did not fail to pick up the newspaper thrown aside by Warden, followed them without any difficulty. When they stopped at a shop in the main street he took the opportunity to buy a copy of the torn newspaper. Mingling with a crowd at the station, he saw them enter a first-class carriage. His acquaintance with the English language was practically confined to the trader's tongue spoken all along the West African coast, and he had little knowledge of English ways. But he was shrewd and tactful, and his keen wits were at their utmost tension. Hence, he was not

at a loss how to act when he found that a ticket examiner was visiting each compartment. Seizing a chance that presented itself, he asked the man if he could inform him where the pretty girl in blue and the tall gentleman in the yachtsman's clothes were going, and a tip of five shillings unlocked the official lips.

"The lady has a return ticket to Langton, in Oxfordshire, and the gentleman a single to London," said the man.

Figuero did not trust his memory. He asked the name of the first-named town again, and how to spell it. Then he wrote something in a note-book and hurried back to the harbor. It was essential that he should find out what vessels these two people came from, for the presence of a Southern Nigeria Deputy Commissioner in Cowes was not a coincidence to be treated lightly.

Seated in a tiny boat in the harbor was a rotund, jolly-looking personage of seafaring aspect. He and the boat were there when the larger craft which brought the girl ashore came to the quay, but Figuero had taken no notice of Evelyn then, because he had not the least notion that Warden was awaiting her. Possibly the sailor-like individual in the small boat could slake his thirst for knowledge.

So he hailed him.

"You lib for know Capt'n Varden?" he asked, with an ingratiating smile and a hand suggestively feeling for a florin.

"I wot?" said the stout man, poking out a wooden leg as he swung round to face his questioner.

"You savvy — you know Capt'n Varden, a mister who walk here one-time — just now — for long minutes."

"There's no one of that name in these parts," replied Peter, who thought he identified this swarthy-faced inquirer.

"Den p'raps you tell name of young lady — very beautiful young lady — who lib for here in ship-boat not much time past? She wear blue dress an' brown hat an' brown boots."

"Oh, everybody knows *her*," grinned Peter. "She's Miss Polly Perkins, of Paddington Green."

"You write 'im name, an' I dash you two shillin'," said Figuero eagerly.

Peter was about to reply that if any dashing was to be done he could take a hand in the game himself, but he thought better of it. Taking the proffered note-book and pencil, he wrote the words laboriously, and pocketed his reward with an easy conscience.

"When Chris heaves in sight I'll send him back for two pounds of steak," he communed. "It was honestly earned, an' I figure on the Captain bein' arf tickled to death when I tell 'im how the Portygee played me for a sucker."

Figuero hastened to the hotel, saw that his sable friends were well supplied with gin and cigarettes, bade them lie *perdu* till he came back, and made his

way to the quay again. Peter was still there, apparently without occupation.

"You lib for take me to yacht *Sans Souci* an' I dash you five shillin'?" he said.

"Right-o, jump in," cried Peter, but he added under his breath, "Sink me if he don't use a queer lingo, but money talks."

He used all his artifices to get Figuero to discuss his business in Cowes, but he met a man who could turn aside such conversational arrows without effort. At any rate, Peter was now sure he was not mistaken in believing that his fare was the "Portuguese slave-trader and gin-runner" spoken of by Warden, and he had not failed to notice the hotel which Figuero had visited so hurriedly.

There was a check at the yacht. Mr. Baumgartner had gone ashore, but would return for luncheon. So Peter demanded an extra half crown for the return journey, and met a wondering Chris with a broad smile.

"You're goin' shoppin', sonny," he exclaimed. "I've been earnin' good money to-day. Sheer off for 'arf an hour, an' I'll tie up the dinghy. I've got a notion that a pint would be a treat."

Thus it came to pass that while Señor Miguel Figuero was puzzling, even alarming the millionaire yacht-owner with his broken talk of Captain Varden, Dep'ty Commissioner and leader of bush expeditions — alarming him so thoroughly that he never dreamed of associating Miss Evelyn Dane with the Polly Perkins of

Peter's juvenile memories — Arthur Warden himself was driving in a hansom from Waterloo to the Foreign Office, and wondering what new phase of existence would open up before him when his news became known to the men who control the destinies of Outer Britain.

CHAPTER V

A MAN AND A STORY — BOTH UNEMOTIONAL

WARDEN, running the gauntlet of doorkeepers and other human watch-dogs, was finally ushered into the presence of an Under Secretary. To him he detailed his business, and, lacking neither the perception nor the modesty that often characterize men of action, he had barely begun to speak ere he fancied that his recital did not command a tenth part of the interest it warranted. Few talkers can withstand the apparent boredom of a hearer, and Warden happened not to be one of the few. Condensing his account of the proceedings on board the *Sans Souci* to the barest summary, he stopped abruptly.

The Under Secretary, leaning back in his chair, rested his elbows on its comfortable arms, and pressed together the tips of his outspread fingers. He scrutinized his nails, and seemingly was much troubled because he had not called in at the manicurist's after lunch. Nevertheless, being an Under Secretary, he owned suave manners, and the significance of Warden's docket-like sentences did not escape him.

"Is that all?" he asked, turning his hands and examining their backs intently.

"Practically all."

There was silence for a while. A clock ticked softly as if to emphasize the peace that reigned on the park side of Whitehall.

"But you make certain deductions, I take it?" murmured the official.

"I could hardly fail to do that, knowing West Africa as I do," was the curt answer. Warden was really annoyed with the man. Without wishing him any positive evil, he wondered how far the Foreign Office cult would carry such an exquisite through a Bush campaign, with its wasting fever, its appalling monotony, its pathless wanderings midst foul swamp and rain-soaked forest — perhaps a month's floundering through quagmire and jungle with a speedy end under a shower of scrap iron fired from some bell-mouthed cannon.

"Will you be good enough to favor me with them?" purred the other, now absorbed in his palms.

"If I had a map —" began Warden, almost contemptuously.

The Under Secretary rose with a certain languid elegance. He was really tired, having worked at the Macedonian gendarmerie regulations until three o'clock that morning. High on the wall, behind Warden's chair, were several long, narrow, mahogany cases, each fitted with a pendent cord. The Under Secretary pulled one, and a large map of Africa fell from its cover.

"I am fairly well acquainted with the Protectorate,

but now you can talk to scale," he said, going back to his seat and resuming his nonchalant attitude.

Warden, still smarting under a sense of the evident insignificance of Britain beyond the seas in the eyes of its home-dwelling custodians, spoke brusquely enough.

"On the Benuë river, a tributary of the Niger, four hundred miles from the coast," he said, "you will find the town of Giré in the Yola District. You see it is just within the sphere of British influence. Germany claims the opposite bank. Well, Oku is near Giré. Oku is not on the map ——"

"I put it there myself yesterday," broke in the Under Secretary.

Warden was gifted with keen sight. He swung round and gave the huge sheet on the wall a closer scrutiny. A great many corrections had been made on it with pen and ink. They were carried out so neatly that they resembled the engraved lettering.

For an instant his eyes met those of the Under Secretary; thenceforth a better understanding reigned.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "Since you gave attention to the position of Oku so recently, I am half inclined to believe that not only my information but my opinions are forestalled."

"We have been at cross purposes," murmured the tired voice. "You are Captain Arthur Warden, who commanded the Oku punitive expedition thirteen months ago. Since early yesterday morning the Colonial Office, at my request, has been trying to discover your whereabouts — trying in vain, I gather

— or you would have mentioned the fact. I really wished to consult you with reference to this very topic. It is all the more gratifying that chance should have led you to be a witness of events which were surmises on our part, and that your sense of duty should bring you here at the earliest possible moment."

Warden positively blushed. It was a relief that the Under Secretary was obviously inclined to visit his manicurist that afternoon rather than wait till the morrow. Such preoccupation gave him time to recover. But he devoted no more time to silent theories anent the disgraceful apathy of the home authorities with reference to West African affairs.

"I cannot insist too strongly on the efforts that are being made by our neighbors to undermine British influence in that quarter," he said. "Their traders pander to native excesses and humor their prejudices. Their pioneers are constantly pushing northward toward the shores of Lake Tchad. Arms and ammunition are being smuggled across the boundary at many points. Preparations are quietly in progress for a transfer of power if ever British authority shows signs of weakening. Therefore, I draw the worst auguries from the presence in Cowes of a clever and unscrupulous filibuster like Figuero, especially when he acts as bear-leader to three disaffected chiefs. Oku, as you know, is an insignificant place, but it has one supreme attribute that gives it among the negroes the importance of Mecca in the Mohammedan world. It is the center of African witchcraft. Its ju-ju men are the most

noted in the whole continent. Their fetish is deadly and irresistible. They can compass the ruin of tribal leaders who are immeasurably more wealthy and powerful than any of their own men. I do not pretend to explain the reason — I can only state the fact — but there can be no gainsaying the simple truth that if men of Oku place their ban on any tribe or individual, that tribe or that man is doomed."

"Can you give instances?"

"Yes. As far away as the river Akini, in the Yoruba District" — and this time Warden did not point to the map, though his words bridged six hundred miles — "there was a quarrel between the up-country traders and the shippers at Lagos. The merchants in the interior tried to close the trade routes, but the local chiefs refused to help them. By some means the traders secured the Oku ban on their side. The Yoruba natives resisted it.

"By Jove! both they and the factors at Lagos were glad enough to come to heel when every ounce of stuff was diverted into French Dahomey. There was no overt act or threat. Oku methods are too clever for that. The authorities were powerless. Hunger coerced the natives, and financial loss brought the people on the coast to terms. And this took place where we were paramount! Heaven only knows what excesses the Oku fetish has caused in inter-tribal wars. Why, when I attacked them, I had to break with my own hands every ju-ju token on the road. Not even our Hausa troops would pass them otherwise."

"They had no ill effect on you, then?" said the other, smiling a little.

"None — at present."

Warden himself was surprised when his lips framed the qualification. For no assignable cause his mind traveled to the lowering face on the gourd, then reposing in his portmanteau at Waterloo Station, and he remembered the curled scrap of tattooed skin in his pocket. He had not mentioned the calabash to the official. Though it bore curiously on the visit of the men of Oku to the Isle of Wight, he believed that such a far-fetched incident would weaken his statements. Since he was inclined at first to err so greatly in his estimate of the Under Secretary's knowledge of West African politics, he was now more resolved than ever not to bring an extravagant toy into a serious discussion. Any reference to it would be ludicrously out of place. He was beginning to entertain a deep and abiding respect for the Foreign Office and its denizens.

The Under Secretary asked a few additional questions before he rose to fold up the map. Warden took the hint, and was about to depart when he received an unlooked-for piece of news.

"By the way, it is almost a certainty that Count von Rippenbach accompanied the Emperor in the visit paid to the *Sans Souci?*" said the official.

"I assume his identity solely from paragraphs in the newspapers."

"It will interest you to learn that the Count has just

returned from an exploring and hunting trip in the Tuburi region."

Now, Tuburi lies in the no-man's land that separates Lake Tchad from German West Africa, and Warden met the Under Secretary's bored glance a second time with quick comprehension.

"I think," went on the quiet voice, "I think it would be well if you kept the Colonial Office posted as to your movements during the remainder of your furlough. Personally, I expect no immediate developments. The Emperor is a busy man. He can only devote half an hour each year to affairs that affect the Niger. But, keep in touch. You may be wanted. I am exceedingly obliged to you. One learns so much from the men who have passed their active lives in lands which one has never seen except in dreams. I dream here sometimes, in front of that map — and its companions. Oh, I had almost forgotten. Do you know Mr. Baumgartner?"

"Only by sight."

"That is useful. It might help if you were to meet him in some unexpected locality. And his yacht, the *Sans Souci*, you have noted her main features, such as the exact number of windows in her deck houses, or the cabin ports fore and aft of the bridge?"

"I watched her closely many hours last night, but I fear I missed those precise details," laughed Warden. "I shall correct the lapse at the earliest opportunity."

"That sort of definite fact assists one's judgment. Paint and rig can be altered, but structural features

remain. I recall the case of the *Sylph*, a foreign cargo-steamer loaded to the funnel with dynamite, and about to pass Port Said at a time when it was peculiarly important to the British fleet that the canal should remain open. She resembled a hundred other disreputable-looking craft of her class, but a lieutenant on the *Cossack* had seen her a year earlier at Bombay, and noticed a dent in the plates on the port bow. His haphazard memory settled a delicate and complicated discussion in Pekin. Good morning! Don't forget to send your address."

Standing in Downing Street to light a cigar, Warden glanced up at the stately building he had just quitted. His views on "red-tape" officialdom had undergone a rapid change during the past hour. It was borne in on him that generations of men like himself had come from the ends of the earth to that storehouse of secrets, and each was convinced that he alone could reveal the solemn tidings which might be the forerunner of modern Europe's Battle of Armageddon. And the Under Secretary was called on to hear every prophet! From such a standpoint the presence in England of a half-caste Portuguese and three full-blooded negroes dwindled to insignificance. True, the Under Secretary had listened, and Warden almost shivered when he realized how narrow was his escape from committing the grave error of discounting his hearer's sympathy and measure of comprehension.

It was not his business to ask questions, but he gathered that others than himself were alive to the

dangers that might spring from a conference between semi-rebellious subjects of Britain in West Africa and the ruler of a mighty nation pent within cramped confines for want of colonies. Oddly enough, the bent plates of the dynamite-laden *Sylph* suggested a strange connection between the carved gourd and the strained position of affairs in the Cameroons. He had no manner of doubt that when the royal yacht crashed into a sunken wreck the previous day it liberated the calabash, which forthwith drifted into the Solent, and escaped notice until discovered by Evelyn Dane. Suppose she had not seen it? All their subsequent actions would have been affected. He might never have known of the strange gathering on board the yacht.

"Queer train of circumstances!" he thought. "If only I could use a pen, what a romance I might contrive with that as a beginning — and this," he added, when, in searching for a box of matches, his fingers closed on the crisp roll of skin, "this as the frontispiece."

He hailed a cab. He wanted to open the bag left at the railway terminus and deposit the gourd with the rest of his belongings in a small flat hired months ago as a *pied-a-terre*. His stock of cigars needed replenishing, and the weird document that had just made its presence felt reminded him that a Portuguese dictionary was lacking. A glance at his watch showed that he could not reach Cowes until a late hour, so he resolved to pass the night in town, go to a theatre, and return to the *Nancy* next morning.

From Waterloo, therefore, he telegraphed to Peter:

"Remaining here until to-morrow. Keep your weather eye open."

He was sure that his friendly factotum would grasp the full meaning of the second sentence, but he would have been the most surprised man in London could he have known that Peter at that moment was plying the three men of Oku with gin.

An accident brought about a slight variation of his plans. It happened that no other passenger claimed the attention of the luggage-room clerk at Waterloo when the portmanteau was unlocked. Warden deposited the gourd on the zinc counter and groped among his belongings for something to cover it.

The attendant, who was watching him, uttered a gasping exclamation.

"Good Lord! sir," he cried, "what sort of horrible thing is that?"

It was then that a hitherto undiscovered property in the gourd brought itself in evidence. No sooner was it placed on a smooth surface than it promptly wobbled into a half upright position, with the negro's face on the upper part. Chance could hardly accomplish this movement. It was the designer's intent, brought about by concealed weights, and Warden instantly remembered that the calabash floated much deeper in the water than would have been the case otherwise. A shaft of sunlight came through a broken pane in the glass roof, and fell directly on the scowling apparition.

The effect on the clerk was phenomenal. He grew livid, and backed away from the counter.

"Well, that's the limit," he muttered. "If I'd ha' known old Hoof an' Horns was so near to me since I kem on duty I'd 'ave gone sick."

Warden laughed, stuffed the gourd into the portmanteau, and hurried to the waiting cab. So preoccupied was he with other matters, he had not realized earlier that under the new conditions he would be in need of some portion of the bag's contents.

It was no easy task to find a Portuguese-English dictionary. He tried half a dozen booksellers in vain, but ultimately unearthed a serviceable volume at a second-hand shop in Charing Cross Road. By the time he reached his flat, five o'clock, he was desperately hungry, having eaten nothing since breakfast.

His rooms looked dismal, and an apologetic hall-porter explained that if the gentleman 'ad on'y sent a wire he'd ha' tidied the place up a bit. Warden went to a restaurant, dined well, and returned at half-past six. There was still an hour or more of daylight, so he began to decipher the unsolved section of the strange manuscript. It was a longer job than he anticipated. Arabic characters, being largely phonetic, do not give a literal rendering of European words. Many pages of the dictionary were searched ere he hit upon the exact rendering of the blurred phrases. But the quest fascinated him. Before it was ended he found it necessary to consult an atlas and an encyclopedia.

At last, allowing for a margin of error in his guesses

at tenses and other variants of root words, he completed a translation, and this is what he had written:

"I, Domenico Garcia, artist and musician in the city of Lisbon, am justly punished for my sins. Being desperate and needy, I joined in an attack on the *Santo Espirito*, homeward-bound from the Indies, and helped in the slaying of all the ship's company. We attacked her when she left Lisbon on the voyage to Oporto, but a great gale from the northeast drove us far out to sea, and then the wind veered to the northwest, and cast us miserably ashore on the African desert. We abode there many days, and saw no means of succor, so we buried most of our ill-gotten gains in that unknown place and turned our faces to the north, thinking to find a Portuguese settlement in the land of the Moors. We died one by one, some from hunger, some from fever, some from the ravages of wild beasts. Six out of fifty-four men reached the town of Rabat in the train of a Moorish merchant. There we were sold as slaves. Three were dead within a month. We who were left, Tommaso Rodriguez, Manoel of Serpa and myself, were sent as presents over the caravan road to that cruel tyrant the black king of Benin. Rodriguez went mad, and was flayed alive for refusing to worship a heathen god. This message is written on his skin. Manoel of Serpa was drowned in the river which these monsters term 'Mother of Waters,' while I, though my life is preserved by reason of my skill in carving, am utterly bereft of hope in this world while filled with fear of God's justice in the next. Christian, you who

read these words, for which I have devised a cunning receptacle that may long survive me, if you would help an erring brother to regain salvation, go yourself, or send some trusty person, to the above-named town of Rabat. I hid there a great ruby which I took from a golden pyx found on board the *Santo Espirito*. It lies in the Hassan Tower, the tomb of an infidel buried outside the walls. A causeway leads to the door, which is three cubits from the ground, and my ruby is in a deep crack between the center stones of the sill of the third window on the left. I placed it there for safety, thinking that perchance I might escape and secure it again. Friend, I am many marches from Rabat but few from death. Find that gem of great price, and cause masses to be said for my soul in the Cathedral of the Patriarch at Lisbon. Inscribed by me, the unhappy Domenico Garcia, in the year 1634, to pleasure that loathly barbarian, M'Wanga, King of Benin, who holds that writing on a white man's skin is most potent magic against fever, even while I, the alchemist, am yielding to its ravages."

The violet-tinted gloom that marks the close of a fine summer's day in London was filling the room with its shadows when Warden had written the last words of a fair copy. He lit a cigar, placed an easy chair so that he might sit with his back to the window, and was about to analyze the queer document which had fallen into his hands in such an extraordinary manner when he noticed that the face on the gourd, though tilted on the table exactly in the same fashion

as on the counter of the luggage-room at Waterloo, appeared to be watching him. Now, no man of strong nervous power likes to feel startled, and that the stealthy menace in those evil eyes was startling he did not attempt to deny. He had not noticed previously that — no matter what the angle — so long as the eyes were visible they seemed to look fixedly at the beholder. Thinking that the waning light was deceptive, he sprang up and built some books into a V-shaped support that enabled him to set the scowling face in many positions. The varying tests all had the same result. The snake-like glance followed him everywhere. The very orbs appeared to turn in the head. In the deepening twilight they seemed to gleam with a dull fire, and Warden was absolutely forced to reason himself out of the expectation that soon those brutal lips would open and overwhelm him with threats.

"Confound you!" he muttered, scarce knowing whether to laugh or fly into a rage at the foolish fancy that led him to address a carven mask, "if you looked that way at poor Domenico Garcia it is not surprising that he should use his comrade's skin as vellum. You black beauty! Are there any of your breed left in Nigeria, I wonder?"

It demanded almost an effort to sink into the chair and disregard the sinister object glaring at him from the table. He picked up the sheet of note-paper containing the translation and set his mind to its proper understanding. While intent on the intricacies of cases and genders — difficulties intensified by the use

The stealthy menace of those evil eyes was startling

Page 84

of archaic phrases and the Arabic script — he had given but passing thought to the general drift of the words. True, the reference to a river named "Mother of Waters" was amazing, because that was the native name for the Benuë, while a search through the encyclopedia showed that the seaport town of Rabat, in Morocco, was famous for its ruined monuments. But now, pondering each sentence, he became alive to their tremendous significance. Their very simplicity was the best witness to the underlying tragedy. A man who dismissed the massacre on board the *Santo Espirito* with the curt statement that he "helped in the slaying of all the ship's company," was not likely to use unnecessary adjectives. "Six out of fifty-four" was also a summary magnificent in its brevity. Garcia reached the sheer apex of the direct narrative style when he said that he and Rodriguez, and Manoel of Serpa, were sent as presents to the King of Benin "over the caravan route." Those four words covered a journey of 2500 miles across mountains, deserts, and jungle-covered swamps, where road there was none, and towns, even the most wretched communities of savages, were hundreds of miles apart. The track probably led through Bel Abbas, Taudeni, and Timbuctu, traversing the very heart of the Sahara, a region so forbidding and inhospitable that even to-day it remains one of the secret places of the world.

And again, there was a grim humor discoverable in a man who, concentrating his life's story into so few words, could yet indulge his mordant wit by writing:

"I am many marches from Rabat but few from death," and even poke a bitter jest at M'Wanga for his fantastic notion of a specific against backwater fever!

It was a forceful picture that Warden conceived when in his mind's eye he saw the "artist and musician," and ex-pirate, too, sitting in the shade of a giant tree near the king's hut, and pricking out with needle and dyes, on parchment torn from the back of his dead comrade, the record of those terrible years. He could limn the hollow cheeks, the wasted frame, the fever-light in the dark eyes, and the melancholy smile that must have lifted the cloud of suffering for a little while when the concluding lines were written. Warden knew the scene so intimately that if he put pencil to paper, and Garcia's long-forgotten shade were permitted to testify to the accuracy of the sketch, there could be no reasonable doubt that imagination must have come very near the truth.

Though the Portuguese did not say as much, it was not hard to guess that the "cunning receptacle" he had devised for his last manuscript was the graven image of M'Wanga himself. His artist's eye had caught the possibilities of the curiously-shaped gourd, and, as he said in his own way, he had used his "skill in carving" as a means of preservation — perhaps of securing a certain measure of good treatment. No doubt the King of Benin, sitting on the state stool in front of his palace of mats and wattle, was greatly flattered by the portrait. He would appreciate its realism while missing its subtle irony. In the circle

of subordinate chiefs and witch-doctors surrounding him there must have been many who hated the white man because he won the royal favor even for a moment. But they would be wary, and join loudly in the chorus of praise, for there was a grove near by in which the latest victims of M'Wanga's wrath fouled the air with their dead bodies.

Garcia's description of the black ruler as "King of Benin" puzzled Warden at first. Modern Benin was far enough removed from Oku and the upper reaches of the Benuë to render the title vague and seemingly mistaken.

Yet Garcia's sparse record already promised an astounding truthfulness. Warden was quite sure he would discover some contemporary proof of the loss of the *Santo Espirito*. He believed that any one who visited the tomb of Hassan beyond the walls of Rabat would find the ruby placed there nearly one hundred and eighty years ago. Why, then, should the chronicler err in his allusion to M'Wanga's rank?

M'Wanga's counterfeit answered the unspoken question. Warden happened to look at the calabash, now hardly visible in the ever-increasing darkness. But the cruel eyes still glinted at him, and he could almost discover a sardonic grin on the thick lips.

"By Jove!" he muttered, "When that fellow reigned in Benin his empire spread as far as his reputation. I have no manner of doubt but he lived in the interior, where it is healthier than on the coast. Yes, you mandevil!" he added, leaping excitedly to his feet as a

new and discomforting thought possessed him. "You did mischief enough during your evil life, and now you have resurrected yourself just in time to take a silent part in more of the wild doings in which you would have gloried."

For he was spurred to this sudden outburst by the knowledge that not only did political trouble loom across the West African sky, but that he, and he only, was the Christian and friend to whom Domenico Garcia made his dying appeal. There was a ruby of great price to be won, and masses to be said in the Cathedral of the Patriarch at Lisbon. Could he refuse to fulfil the terms of that pathetic bequest? He had nearly six months of unexpired furlough at disposal, and the Under Secretary did not appear to have any dread of immediate developments in Nigeria, such as would demand the recall of officers to their duties. What argument would convince his own mind that he might justly decline an almost intolerable legacy?

Well, he would go into the pros and cons of a doubtful problem later. He was not a rich man, and the journey to Rabat and back would probably be very expensive. Certainly that ruby would look very well on the white throat of Evelyn Dane, though people might well wonder how the wife of a poorly-paid official could afford to wear a "gem of great price."

The conceit so tickled him that he laughed, laughed all the louder, perhaps, because he was conscious that the black king of Benin was scoffing at him maliciously from the table. But the glee died in his throat when

a thunderous double rat-tat shook the outer door of the flat, and Warden was prepared, for one thrilling instant, to fight a legion of ghosts and demons if need be. Then his scattered wits told him that His Majesty's post demanded his appearance. He struck a match, lighted the gas, and went to the door, where a small boy, who seemed to be physically incapable of using a knocker with such vehemence, handed him a telegram.

It was brief and to the point:

"*Sans Souci* sailed 3 P.M. Niggers and friend left for London 6.30. Thought you would like to know. Peter."

CHAPTER VI

WHEREIN WARDEN SETS A NEW COURSE

WARDEN'S theatre-going that evening resolved itself into a stroll in the park and an early return to his chambers. Before going out, he had thrown a towel over the calabash, and told the porter not to touch anything in the sitting-room. The plan was effective; the man of Oku created no disturbance.

Oddly enough, the young officer was now beginning to understand the mesmeric influence which Evelyn Dane and Peter Evans acknowledged instantly — and with this admission came the consciousness that the negro's mask lost its power unless actually in evidence. Hence, none of the vapors and misty fancies of the preceding hours interfered with his rest. He slept soundly, rose betimes, and ate a good breakfast — unfailing signs these of a sound mind in a sound body.

Yet he might have been puzzled if called on to explain why he deliberately placed the gourd in a sponge-bag, and put it in his portmanteau before returning to the Isle of Wight. His action was, perhaps, governed by some sense of the fitness of things. If it were ordained that the presentment of the dead and gone M'Wanga

should scowl again at the world during a period when the fortunes of his country were at stake, it was not for Warden to disobey the silent edict. He was not swayed solely by idle impulse. In bringing the head to London he meant to please the only people who knew of its existence; he ignored their wishes now because he felt a tugging at his heart-strings when his thoughts reverted to the wretched history of Domenico Garcia. The instant he arrived at this decision it ceased to trouble his mind further.

Before going to the station he made a few purchases, and, being near Pall Mall, thought he would secure any letters that might happen to be at his club. Among others, he found a pressing invitation from Lady Hilbury asking him to call when in London. Now, he was, in a degree, a protégé of her ladyship. Her husband was a former governor of Nigeria, and her friendly assistance had helped, in the first instance, to lift Warden out of the ruck of youngsters who yearly replete the ranks of officialdom in West Africa. It was more than probable that Sir Charles and Lady Hilbury would be out of town, and a note written at their residence would show that he visited them at the earliest opportunity.

To his surprise, Lady Hilbury was at home, and insisted that he should stay for luncheon.

Behold, then, Warden installed in a cozy morning-room, exchanging gossip with his hostess, and his parcels and portmanteau given over to the butler's care.

He was irrevocably committed to an afternoon train when Lady Hilbury electrified him with a morsel of news that was as unexpected as any other shock that had befallen him of late.

"By the way, an old friend of yours is staying with me," she said — "Mrs. Laing — you knew her better as Rosamund Miller, I fancy?"

Warden schooled his features into a passable imitation of a smile. Mrs. Laing — the pretty, irresponsible Rosamund Miller — was the last person he wished to encounter, but he was quick to see the twinkle in Lady Hilbury's eyes, and he accepted the inevitable.

"I shall be glad to renew the acquaintance," he said. "It was broken off rather abruptly — at Government House if I remember aright."

"Poor Rosamund! That was her mother's contriving. She never really liked Laing, but he was what people term 'a good match,' and he has at least justified that estimate of his worth by dying suddenly and leaving his widow nearly two hundred thousand pounds."

"A most considerate man," murmured Warden.

"Then you have not forgiven her?"

"Forgive! What a harsh word from your lips. Pray consider. On your own estimate she owes me two hundred thousand thanks."

"Arthur, I don't like you as a cynic. I am old enough to be your mother. Indeed, it was my love for your mother that first led me to take an interest in your welfare, and I should be doing wrong if I hid

from you the fact that it nearly broke Rosamund's heart to throw you over."

"I trust the lapse of years has healed the fracture," he said.

Lady Hilbury looked at him in silence for a moment. She remembered the white-faced subaltern who heard, at her hospitable table, that Rosamund Miller had married a wealthy planter at Madeira — married him suddenly, within a month after her departure from the coast.

"Is there another woman?" she asked quietly.

"Not single spies but whole battalions. How I have managed to escape their combined charms all these years is a marvel. Seriously, Lady Hilbury, you would not have me take a wife to my special swamp, and I would not care to leave her in England drawing half my pay. All my little luxuries would vanish at one fell swoop."

"I would like to see you happy, Arthur, and there is always the possibility of marrying some one who would demand no sacrifices."

"Is Mrs. Laing out?" he inquired.

"Yes. Of course you want to meet her again?"

"I think not. I don't mean to be unkind, but the tender recollections I cherish are too dear to be replaced by a fresh set."

"That sounds theatrical — a sarcastic line out of some comedy of manners. If so, you shall have a wider stage than my boudoir. We lunch at one o'clock. It is 12.45 now, and Rosamund is always punctual."

Warden, though raging at the dilemma, made the best of it.

"How long has Mrs. Laing been a widow?" he said.

"Nearly a year. Evidently your bush campaign shut out the usual sources of intelligence."

He glanced at his watch.

"I really must catch the three o'clock train to Cowes," he explained. "I am on Government service, and I suppose it would be quite impossible to arrange everything in a couple of hours. I am unacquainted with the formalities, but even a special license demands ——"

"How unkind! Arthur, what has happened to you? How you are changed!"

"Never changed where you are concerned, Lady Hilbury!" he cried, sentiment for once gaining the upper hand — "you, to whom I owe so much! That, indeed, would be the wintry wind of ingratitude. Now, let me make amends. My behavior shall be discreet — my decorous sympathy worthy of a High Church curate. I was staggered for a few seconds, I admit, but the effects of the blow have passed, and my best excuse is that other things are perplexing me. I have no secrets from you, you know, so let me tell you why I am here."

Sure of an interested listener in the wife of an ex-ruler of the great Niger territory, Warden plunged into an account of recent events. It was not necessary to mention Evelyn Dane in order to hold her attention. The first reference to Figuero and the Oku chiefs

attained that end. No mean diplomatist herself, Lady Hilbury understood much that would perforce be hidden from all save those acquainted with West Africa.

"You will permit me to tell Charles?" came the eager question when he had finished.

"Of course. Why not?"

"There are those in the administration who are jealous of his record," she said. "Not every one has his tact in dealing with natives. It is no secret that our relations with the emirs of the interior have been strained almost to breaking point of late ——"

A motor stopped outside the house and a bell rang. Lady Hilbury bent forward. Her voice sank to a new note of intense conviction.

"You have been given a great opportunity, Arthur. It may come sooner than you think. Grasp it firmly. Let no man supplant you, and it will carry you far."

Her ladyship's manner no less than her earnest words told Warden that there were forces in motion of which he was yet in complete ignorance. It was sufficiently puzzling to find an Under Secretary so well informed as to the identity of certain visitors to Cowes, but when a woman in the position of his hostess — with her wide experience of the seldom-seen workings of the political machine — went out of her way to congratulate him on a "great opportunity," he was thrilled with a sudden elation.

Thus, when his hand closed on that of Rosamund Laing, there was a flush on his bronzed face, a glint

of power and confidence in his eyes, that might well be misinterpreted by a woman startled almost to the verge of incoherence.

When she asked where Lady Hilbury was, and if she were alone, the footman merely announced the fact that a gentleman had called and would make one of the luncheon party. Rosamund entered the boudoir with an air of charming impulsiveness practised so sedulously that it had long ceased to be artificial. For once in her life it abandoned her. Warden's friendly greeting was such a bolt from the blue that she faltered, paled and blushed alternately, and actually stammered a few broken words with the shy diffidence of a schoolgirl.

The phase of embarrassment passed as quickly as it had arisen. Both the man and the woman were too well-bred to permit the shadows of the past to darken the present. Lady Hilbury, too, rose to the occasion, and they were soon chatting with the unrestrained freedom of old and close acquaintanceship.

Then Warden discovered that the lively impetuous girl who taught him the first sharp lesson in life's disillusionment had developed into a beautiful, self-possessed, almost intellectual woman of the world. She was gowned with that unobtrusive excellence which betokens perfect taste and a well-lined purse. Certain little hints in her costume showed that the memory of her late husband did not press too heavily upon her. The fashionable modiste can lend periodicity to grief, and Mrs. Laing was passing through the heliotrope stage of widowhood.

Her exquisite complexion was certainly somewhat bewildering to the untrained glance of the mere male. Warden's recollection, vivid enough now, painted a dark-skinned, high-colored girl of nineteen, with expressive features, a mop of black hair, and a pair of brilliant eyes that alternated between tints of deepest brown and purple.

The eyes remained, though their archness was subdued, but, for the rest, he saw a neck and forehead of marvelous whiteness, a face of repose, cheeks and ears of delicate pink, and a waved and plaited mass of hair of the hue known as Titian red. He found himself comparing her with Evelyn Dane, whose briar-rose coloring shone through clusters of delightful little freckles, and, somehow, the contrast was displeasing.

The conventional smile of small talk must have yielded to the strain, because Rosamund Laing noticed his changed expression.

"Dear me, what have I said now?" she asked. They were seated at table, at the end of a pleasant meal, and the talk had wandered from recent doings to a long-forgotten point to point steeple-chase won by Warden on a horse which Rosamund herself had nominated.

He recovered his wandering wits instantly.

"It is not anything that you have said, Mrs. Laing, but my own thoughts that are worrying me," he said. "I have been trying to dodge the unpleasant knowledge that I must gather up my traps and fly to Waterloo. Lady Hilbury knows that I was *en route* to the Solent

when I called — and — if I hesitated — which is unbelievable — she prevailed on me to stay by the overwhelming argument that you would appear forthwith."

It was the simplest of compliments, but it sufficed. Rosamund imperilled her fine complexion by blushing again deeply.

"I was indulging in the vain hope that we might see you often, now that we are all in England," she said.

"Captain Warden has still six months' furlough at his disposal," put in Lady Hilbury. "He is leaving town on business at the moment, but I shall take care he returns at the earliest date."

He stood for a moment in a strong light when he was to say good-by. Mrs. Laing noticed the scar on his forehead.

"Have you had an accident?" she asked, with a note of caressing tenderness in her voice.

"Nothing to speak of. A slight knock on the head while swimming in the Solent — that is all."

The door had scarce closed on him when Rosamund turned to her friend. She spoke slowly, but Lady Hilbury saw that the knuckles of a white hand holding the back of a chair reddened under the force of the grip.

"I dared not asked him," came the steady words, "but — perhaps you can tell me — is he unmarried?"

"Yes."

"And free?"

"My dear, I think so."

The younger woman let go the chair. Her hands flew to her face to hide the tears that started forth unchecked.

"Ah, dear Heaven," she murmured, "if only I could be sure!"

That evening, while the incense of tobacco rose from the deck of the *Nancy*, Warden learned from Peter the history of the hours immediately succeeding his departure from Cowes.

It was unutterably annoying to hear that Figuero had seen him in Evelyn Dane's company, and he deduced a Machiavellian plot from the visit subsequently paid by the Portuguese to the *Sans Souci*. The journey to Milford indirectly suggested by the Under Secretary's inquiry anent the appearance of the yacht now became a fixed purpose from which nothing would divert him. It seemed to be impossible that Mr. Baumgartner could fail to recognize the girl's description, since comparison with Rosamund Laing had shown him that Evelyn was by far the most beautiful creature in England! He was sure that her life would be made miserable by suspicion, if, indeed, she had not already received a curt notification that her services were not required.

Peter's afternoon with the negroes was evidently Gargantuan in its chief occupation — the consumption of ardent spirits.

"I never did see any crowd 'oo could shift liquor like them," mused the skipper of the *Nancy*. "It was 'Dash me one bottole, Peter,' every five minutes if I'd

run to it. I stood 'em three, just in your interests, captain, an' then I turned a pocket inside out, sayin' 'No more 'oof, savvy?' They savvied right enough. Out goes one chap they called Wanger ——"

"Do you mean to tell me that one of those three men was named M'Wanga?" broke in Warden, and in the darkness Peter could not see the blank amazement on his employer's face.

"That's it, sir — funny sort o' click they gev' in front of it. Sink me, but you do it a treat! Well, 'is nibs comes back with two bottles, an' we finished the lot afore I began to wonder if I was quite sartin which of my legs was the wooden one. But, bless yer 'eart, there's no 'arm in them three niggers. I could live among 'em twenty year an' never 'ave a wrong word wi' one of 'em."

"Could you gather any inkling of their business from their talk?"

Peter tamped some half-burned tobacco into the bowl of his pipe with the head of a nail before replying.

"There was just one thing that struck me as a bit pecooliar, sir," he said, after a meditative pause. "A joker 'oo tole me 'is name was Pana seems to be sort o' friendly with a serving-maid in the *Lord Nelson.* She brought in the bottles I ordered, an' each time Pana tried to catch 'old of 'er. The third time he grabbed her for fair, an' sez: 'You lib for Benin country w'en I king?' At that one of 'is pals jabbered some double Dutch, an' they all looked 'ard at me, but I was gazin' into the bottom of a glass at the time

an' they thought I wasn't listenin'. It never occurred to 'em that I don't swaller with me ears."

"Were you present when Figuero returned?"

"Yes, sir, an' a nasty cur he can be w'en he likes. He called 'em all the different sorts o' drunken swine he could think of, an' tole me I was wuss, to go leadin' pore ignorant blacks astray. My godfather! Five bottles of Ole Tom among three of 'em, an' me, 'oo 'ates the smell o' gin, tryin' to doctor my poison wi' water! If you'll believe me, sir, at supper-time I couldn't bring myself to touch the nicest bit o' steak that ever sizzled on the *Nancy*'s grid."

"When did the *Sans Souci* sail?"

"Just before I sent you that telegram, sir. Chris saw the niggers an' the Portygee off by train, an' kem straight back to the dinghy. We pulled away to the cutter, an' sighted the yacht steamin' west, so I 'bout ship an' landed Chris near the post-orfis. The butcher 'oo supplied their meat tole me this mornin' that he was to send his bill to Plymouth."

Warden, who was wont to take pride in his ability to be absolutely lazy when on a holiday, suddenly stood up.

"With this breeze we ought to make Plymouth by to-morrow morning?" he cried.

"Are you in earnest, guv'nor?" demanded the astonished Peter.

"Fully. Bring the cutter past the Needles, and as soon as St. Abb's Head-light is a-beam you can turn in."

Evans realized that his master meant what he said. Chris, who was in bed and sound asleep, awoke next morning to find the *Nancy* abreast of Star Point. They reached Plymouth in a failing wind about midday, but Warden's impatient glance searched the magnificent harbor in vain for the trim outlines of the *Sans Souci*. As the cutter drew near the inner port both he and Peter knew that they had come on a wild-goose chase, no matter how assured the Cowes butcher might be of his account being paid.

It was a gloriously fine day, but Warden's impatience brooked no interference with his plans. It even seemed to him that the elements had conspired with his personal ill luck to bring him into this land-locked estuary and bottle him up there for a week. Strive as best he might, he could not shake off the impression that he ought to be acting, and not dawdling about the south coast in this aimless fashion. He was quite certain that a dead calm had overtaken him, and, with this irritating because unfounded belief, came a curious suggestion of calamity in store for the *Nancy* if he tried to weather the Land's End *en route* to Milford Haven.

"Go to Africa!" whispered some mysterious counselor in words that were audible to an unknown sense. "Go where you are wanted. Lady Hilbury told you that a great opportunity had presented itself. Seize it! Delay will be fatal!"

Peter, watching the young officer furtively as he trimmed the cutter to her anchorage, was much per-

turbed. Though a true sailorman, he seldom swore, for his religious connections were deep and sincere, but he did use anathemas now.

"I wish that d—d Turk's Head 'ad rotted in the sea afore ever it kem aboard this craft," he muttered. "There's bin nothin' but fuss an' worry every hour since that bonny lass set her eyes on it. Onless I'm vastly mistaken it'll bust up the cruise, an' here was Chris an' me fixed up to the nines for the nex' three months. It's too bad, that it is" — and the rest of his remarks became unfit for publication.

It would be interesting to learn how far Peter would have fallen from grace if he were told that the calabash was even then reposing in a portmanteau, by the side of Warden's bunk. Happily, he was spared the knowledge. It would come in good time, but was withheld for the present.

Warden, restless as a caged lion, did not, as was his habit, bring a folding-chair to the shady side of the mainsail and lose himself in the pages of a book. A purpose in life of some sort became almost an obsession. Fixing on the *Sans Souci's* known objective at the extreme southwestern corner of Wales on the following Wednesday, he suddenly hit upon the idea of walking across Dartmoor and taking a steamer from Ilfracombe to Swansea. Once committed to a definite itinerary of that nature there would be no turning back. He counted on being able to accomplish the first stage of the journey easily in three days, which would bring him to Ilfracombe on the Tuesday. The

only question that remained was the uncertainty of the steamship service, and a telegram to the shipping agents would determine that point in an hour or less.

So Peter brought him ashore in the dinghy, and the message was despatched, and Warden went for a stroll on the Hoe, of which pleasant promenade he had hardly traversed a hundred yards when he saw Evelyn Dane seated there, deeply absorbed in a magazine. A bound of his heart carried conviction to his incredulous brain. Though the girl's face was bent and almost hidden by her hat, she offered precisely the same harmonious picture that had so won his admiration when she sat opposite to him in the dinghy on that memorable afternoon that now seemed so remote in the annals of his life.

A few steps nearer, and he could no longer refuse to believe his eyes. He recalled the exact patterns of a brooch, a marquise ring, an ornament in her hat. Seating himself, with a rapid movement, quite close to her, he said softly:

> "More, much more, the heart may feel
> Than the pen may write or the lip reveal."

Evelyn turned with a startled cry. She was conscious that some one had elected to share her bench; at the first sound of Warden's voice she was ready to spring up and walk away, without looking at him. Her bright face crimsoned with delight when she grasped the wonderful fact that he was actually at her side.

She closed the magazine with a bang, and held out her hand.

"This is indeed a surprise," she cried. "How in the world did you know I was here?"

"I didn't know," he said, clasping her fingers firmly. "At least, that cannot be true. My ordinary eat-three-meals-a-day, keep-away-from-the-fire-and-you won't-get-burned wits informed me that you were in far-off Oxfordshire, but some kindly monitor from within, unseen, unheard, yet most worthy of credence, led me here, to your side — may I say — to your very feet."

Laughing and blushing, and vainly endeavoring to extricate her hand from his grasp — because truly she began to fear that he was drawing her towards him — her first uncontrolled action was to glance around and discover if any passers-by were gazing at them. Instantly she knew she had made a mistake, and the imprisoned hand was snatched away emphatically. If anything, this only added to her confusion, for it bore silent testimony to her knowledge of his lover-like attitude. But she gallantly essayed to retrieve lost ground.

"I was not an hour at home," she explained volubly, "before Mrs. Baumgartner telegraphed and afterward wrote an entire change of arrangements. I am not going to Milford Haven. Miss Beryl Baumgartner came with some friends to a little place down the coast there, a place called Salcombe, I think, and the *Sans Souci* arrived there yesterday. They all come on to

Plymouth this evening, and they wish me to be ready to go on board about nine o'clock, when we sail for Oban, only stopping twice on the way to coal."

"Marvelous!" cried Warden. "You reel off amazing statements with the self-possession of a young lady reciting a Browning poem. No, I shall not explain what I mean — not yet, at any rate. The glorious fact prevails that you are free till nine."

"Free!" she repeated, not that she was at a loss to understand him, but rather to gain time to collect her thoughts.

"Absurd, of course. I mean bound — absolutely bound to me for a superb vista of — let me see — lunch — long drive in country — tea — more driving — dinner. — Ah! let us not look beyond the dinner."

"But ——"

"But me no buts. I shall butt myself violently against any male person who dares to lay prior claim to you, while, should the claimant be a lady, I shall butter her till she relents."

"Still ——"

"I suppose I must listen," he complained. "Well, what is the obstacle?"

She hesitated an instant. Then, abandoning pretense — for she, like Warden had lived through many hours of self-scrutiny since they parted at Portsmouth — she laughed unconcernedly.

"There is none that I know of," she admitted. "I had never seen Plymouth, so I traveled here yesterday evening. My belongings are in the big hotel there.

I am a mere excursionist, out for the day. And now that I have yielded all along the line, I demand my woman's rights. My presence here is readily explained. What of yours?"

He hailed a passing carriage and directed the man to take them to the hotel.

"I don't think I can really clear matters up to your satisfaction unless you permit me to call you Evelyn," he said, daringly irrelevant.

Midsummer madness is infectious — under certain conditions.

"That is odd," she cried, yet there was but feeble protest in her voice.

"To make things even you must call me Arthur."

"How utterly absurd!"

"That is not my fault. The name was given me. I yelled defiance, but I had to have it, like the measles."

"You know very well ——"

"'Pon my honor, Evelyn, the greatest of your many charms is your prompt sympathy. In those few words you have reconciled me to my lot."

"I think Arthur is rather a nice name," she sighed contentedly. After all, it was best to humor him, and he was the first man who had ever won her confidence.

"I ask for more than pity," he said. "Nevertheless, if I would gain credence I must propound a plain tale. List, then, while I unfold marvels."

He was a good talker, and he kept her amused and interested, at times somewhat thrilled, by the recital of his doings in London.

They were in a carriage speeding out into the lovely country westward of Plymouth when he told her the strange history of Domenico Garcia. She shivered a little at the gruesome memory of the "parchment" which she had examined so intently, but she did not interrupt, save for an occasional question, until he reached that part of his narrative which ended in the determination of the previous night to sail to Plymouth forthwith.

"It is all very strange and mysterious," she said at last. "You were coming to Milford Haven, I gather?"

"Yes."

"And were it not for the impulse that brought me here you would now be on your way over Dartmoor?"

"That was my fixed intention."

"Was it so very important that you should know all about the *Sans Souci?*"

"I would have said so to the Under Secretary."

There was a pause. Warden deliberately passed the opening given by her words. In broad daylight, and whirling rapidly through a village, it behooved him to be circumspect. Between dinner and nine o'clock he would contrive other opportunities.

"Lady Hilbury must be very nice," she went on, after a brief silence.

"You will like her immensely when you know her," he could not help saying, at the same time thanking his stars that he had made no mention of Rosamund Laing.

There was a further pause. Evelyn fancied that her voice was well under control when she asked:

"Have you decided to carry out poor Domenico Garcia's last request?"

"Before answering, will you tell me what you would do in my place?"

"I would go to Rabat, if it were in my power, and there were no undue risk in the undertaking. I don't think I would be happy if I had not made the effort. Yet, Rabat is a long way from England. Would you be absent many weeks? Perhaps such a journey would spoil your leave. And then — things may happen in West Africa. You may be needed there."

"Rabat is a half-way house to Oku, Evelyn," he said. "I am going, of course, for two reasons. In the first instance, I want to set Garcia's soul at rest about those masses which, it seems to me, can only be done by obeying the letter of his instructions. And, secondly, I mean to secure that ruby."

This time she passed no comment.

He caught her arm and bent closer.

"If I bring it to you in Madeira you will not refuse to accept it?" he said.

"Now you are talking nonsense," she replied, turning and looking at him bravely, with steadfast scrutiny.

"No. There would be a condition, of course. With the ruby you must take the giver."

"Are you asking me to marry you?" she almost whispered.

"Yes."

"After knowing me a few idle hours of three days?"

"I was exactly the same mind the first time I met you. I see no valid reason why I should change a well-balanced opinion during the next thirty or forty years."

He felt her arm trembling in his clasp, and a suspicious moisture glistened in her fine eyes.

"I think, somehow, I know you well enough to believe that you are in earnest," she faltered. "But let us forget now that you have said those words. Come to me later — when your work is done — and if you care to repeat them — I shall — try to answer — as you would wish."

And then, for a few hours, they lived in the Paradise that can be entered only by lovers.

Not that there were tender passages between them — squeezings, and pressings and the many phrases of silent languages that mean "I love you." Neither was formed of the malleable clay that permits such sudden change of habit. Each dwelt rather in a dream-land — the man hoping it could be true that this all-pleasing woman could find it possible to surrender herself to him utterly — the woman becoming more alive each moment to the astounding consciousness that she loved and was beloved.

Their happiness seemed to be so fantastically complete that they made no plans for the future. They were wilfully blind to the shoals and cross currents that must inevitably affect the smooth progress of that life voyage they would make together. Rather, when they talked, did they seek to discover more of the past,

of their common tastes, of their friends, of the "little histories" of youth. Thus did they weld the first slender links of sweet intimacy — those links that are stronger than fetters of steel in after years — and the hours flew on golden wings.

Once only did Warden hold Evelyn in his arms — in a farewell embrace ere she left him to join the yacht. And, when that ecstatic moment had passed, and the boat which held his new-found mate was vanishing into the gloom, he awoke to the knowledge that he had much to accomplish before he might ask her to be his bride.

But he thrust aside gray thought for that night of bliss. He almost sang aloud as he walked to the quay where Peter was waiting, after receiving a brief message earlier in the day. He was greeted cheerily.

"I'm main glad to see you again, sir," said the skipper of the *Nancy*. "Somehows, I had a notion this mornin' that we was goin' to lose you for good an' all."

Then Warden remembered the inquiry he had sent to Ilfracombe, and the reply that was surely waiting for him at the post-office, and he laughed with a quiet joyousness that was good to hear.

"Peter," he said, "you're a first-class pilot, but neither you nor any other man can look far into the future, eh?"

"No, sir," came the prompt answer, "that's a sea without charts or soundin's an' full of everlastin' fog. But sometimes one can do a bit o' guessin', an' that's wot I've bin doin' since Chris tole me he saw you an' the young leddy a-drivin' in a keb!"

CHAPTER VII

TWO WOMEN

Mr. Isidore David Baumgartner was in a state of high good humor. After wasting many hundreds of cartridges he had actually shot a driven grouse. True, the method of slaughter amounted almost to a crime. Traveling fast and low before the wind, the doomed bird flew straight toward the butts. Baumgartner closed his eyes, fired both barrels — the first intentionally, the second from sheer nervousness — and a cloud of feathers, out of which fell all that was left of legs, wings, and body, showed how a gallant moor-cock had met his fate.

"There's a clean hit for you, Sandy," cried the little man delightedly. "It's all knack. I knew I could do it, once I got the hang of it."

"Man, but ye stoppit him," replied Sandy, who doled out encouragement with a sour grin. The shattered carcass lay in full view on a tuft of heather. Two ounces of shot had riddled it at a distance of ten feet.

"I suppose the second barrel was hardly necessary," said Baumgartner, more critically.

"It's best to mak' sure," said the sardonic gillie,

"but now ye've got yer 'ee in, as the sayin' is, mebbe ye'll be droppin' ithers, Mr. Baumgartner."

He held forth the spare gun as a hint. Grouse were plentiful at Lochmerig, and three other men in the line of shelters were busy. Baumgartner forthwith excelled himself. Just as a novice at Monte Carlo may achieve several winning coups in succession, so did fortune favor one whom nature had not designed as a sportsman. He shot with blind confidence, and brought down half a dozen birds while they came sailing over the crest of the hill before a strong breeze that brought them to close range. That he rendered them for the most part uneatable did not trouble him in the least. Sport was merely slaying to him; his only trophies previously were some tame pigeons secured for practice.

So Baumgartner was well content. As he trudged down the brae to Lochmerig Lodge, discoursing learnedly to his companions anent the "stopping" qualities of his eighty-guinea pair of guns, his eyes roved over the beauties of loch and glen, and the day-dream that it would be well to pass the remainder of his days in this quiet haven cast its spell on his soul. Rich as he was, he owned no home except a garish mansion in New York. His career had been meteoric, full of lurid energy. Beginning with the lust of money, he had followed the beaten track of his order, and became obsessed with the lust of power. Yet his ambition needed spurring. Already the tremendous issues involved in the project which procured him the condescending patronage of an emperor were revealing

their dangers. Here, in Scotland, surrounded by subservient friends and well-trained servants, he longed for rest. Lairdship was proving a subtle rival to West African adventure.

Moreover, he was married, and Mrs. Baumgartner was endowed with a will of her own and a tongue to bear witness thereto. She was learning to appreciate the easy tolerance of English society, which proved itself far more accessible than the Four Hundred of New York. Men and women of recognized social rank and pleasant manners were quite willing to shoot over the Lochmerig moors, play bridge in the Lodge, cruise on the *Sans Souci*, and generally live and amuse themselves at the millionaire's expense. Mrs. Baumgartner was shrewd enough to see that the gain of a big slice of British territory in West Africa would offer poor compensation for the loss of the new career which was opening up an alluring vista to her dazzled gaze. For once, therefore, discord threatened in the household. In her daughter, too, she found a powerful ally. A month of close companionship with Evelyn Dane had completely changed the life-theories of a spoiled and affected girl of eighteen. Too young as yet to be jealous of Evelyn's greater attractions, Beryl Baumgartner was alert enough to see that vulgar pertness was ludicrously inadequate as a means of winning male regard. Luckily, she became enthusiastically attached to Evelyn from the first hour. The wonderful faculty of hero-worship had survived the precocity of a too-indulgent rearing. It was stronger now than

mere counsel. Beryl began to copy her new friend, and at once she began to improve.

It was, therefore, a very dark cloud that lowered over the Baumgartner sky when a family coach which brought visitors from the ten miles distant railway deposited at the hospitable door of Lochmerig Lodge, at one and the same moment, Mrs. Laing, Miguel Figuero, and Count von Rippenbach. As it happened, the three already knew each other slightly. They had met in Madeira during the previous winter. Figuero then acted as bear-leader to the count before he started on the hunting trip in the Tuburi hinterland which had come to the Under Secretary's knowledge.

It was a surprise to both men when they encountered Mrs. Laing at Perth Junction. They passed several interesting hours in her company, and von Rippenbach, who spoke English better than Figuero, was a skilled cross-examiner. Thus, he soon hit upon a plausible explanation of the lady's appearance in Inverness-shire. She was one of Mrs. Baumgartner's social links with England. On his part, as a "distinguished foreigner," he would be acceptable in a higher circle than that occupied by his host, but, when it came to Figuero, Mrs. Laing was puzzled — indeed, somewhat amused.

The man's record was no secret. Tolerant Madeira did not ask how he had risen to seeming affluence. It helped him to spend his money, and was graciously blind to the darker pages of his history — nevertheless, those pages were an open book to local gossips.

Figuero, a shrewd and level-headed scoundrel, was the most taken aback of the trio at this unlooked-for meeting. He was aware of the love passages between Warden and Rosamund Laing; he feared Warden; and here was the woman whom Warden had once loved crossing his path at an awkward hour.

The situation might have provided harmless interest for a number of unimportant people at Lochmerig if Figuero had not recognized Evelyn Dane the instant he set eyes on her. Straightway the tiny rills of intrigue and suspicion flowing through the adventurer's brain united into a torrent.

Seizing the first opportunity that presented itself, he drew Baumgartner into an unoccupied room, and closed and locked the door. Before the surprised millionaire could utter a word of protest, the West African fire-brand began to question him in his own tongue, since Baumgartner, despite his Teutonic label and semblance, had a Portuguese mother.

"Why did you fail to recognize the girl I described to you in Cowes?" he demanded fiercely. "Malediction! Are you mad, that you would risk our enterprise in this fashion?"

"You must neither address me in that manner nor talk in riddles," growled Baumgartner. "What girl? How am I to know one among the ten thousand girls of a regatta week?"

"Riddles! It is you who are the conundrum, senhor. I tell you that this Englishman, Captain Warden, a Deputy Commissioner in Nigeria, is the

man we have most to fear, yet you permit one who is probably his fiancée, and surely in league with him, to live in your house and spy on the actions of yourself and your friends. What will Count von Rippenbach think when I tell him? What will the Emperor say, after all the precautions we took that none should know——"

"Silence!" roared Baumgartner, who could hold his own in matters that demanded clear thinking and careful guidance. "You are too ready with some names, Senhor Figuero, yet too sparing of others that may explain your folly. Of whom are you speaking?"

"Of the young Englishwoman I have just met, of course. I am not good at catching these strange words, but I mean the good-looking one, the tall slim girl in white muslin, she with brown hair and Madonna eyes ——"

"Do you mean Miss Dane?"

"Yes — that is she. I remember now."

"My daughter's companion! Nonsense!"

"It is true, I tell you. Am I likely to forget a face — and such a face! Did I not describe her dress? She must have left your yacht just before Warden met her. And they are lovers. How can I be mistaken? They went away from Cowes in the same train. I told you her destination. What was it? I have it written here," and he hurriedly turned over the leaves of a note-book.

Baumgartner was undoubtedly impressed. Figuero's earnestness was not to be gainsaid, and he had an unpleasant belief, now he came to recall the inci-

dents of a busy day, that Evelyn Dane was dressed exactly as Warden's unknown acquaintance was pictured.

Meanwhile, the Portuguese found the memorandum he sought.

"Here it is," he snapped, all a-quiver with the doubts that threatened the destruction of his pet scheme of vengeance on the British power which had stopped the supply of slaves to the Sultan of Bogota. "Langton in Oxfordshire — that is the place. The railway official spelt it for me. A boatman told me he knew the girl, and gave me some outlandish name as being hers. Now I see he was fooling me. What was his motive? Was he also an emissary of Warden's? Let me assure you, senhor, this thing begins to look ugly."

Baumgartner's heavy jowl lost some of the ruddy hue of the moors. Count von Rippenbach had been ready enough to apply the screw when his quondam confederate showed a degree of hesitancy in falling in with the proposal he came from London to make, and this latest complication would strengthen von Rippenbach's hands beyond resistance. Already the lairdship of Lochmerig was becoming visionary, and the far-off hills of interior Africa grew more substantial in their dim outlines.

But the millionaire, though he might toady to a Scottish gillie for a crumb of recognition as a marksman, had not attained his present position by displaying weakness in face of a crisis.

"I believe you are the victim of a delusion," he said, with some show of dignity, "but, even if you are right, we gain nothing by yielding to panic. What if Miss Dane is, as you say, Warden's *belle amie?* Why should that be harmful? Does it not explain his visit to Cowes? Indeed, once we are convinced that they know each other, we can turn the circumstance to our own purpose. I am far from crediting an insignificant official of the Niger Company with the importance you seem to attach to him, but, granted he is a hostile influence to be feared, why not stalk him through an unsuspecting agent?"

"You don't rate him high enough," muttered Figuero. "He can sway those stupid niggers like no other man in Nigeria. He talks Arabic, and Hausa, and krooboy palaver as well as I do. He broke the Oku ju-ju when it was worth a thousand lives to touch a stick or a feather. If Warden gets wind of our project before we are ready, we will fail, and you realize what that means to all of us."

A dinner gong came to Baumgartner's aid. He wished to avoid any discussion on the last point raised by the Portuguese. It bristled with thorns. Von Rippenbach revealed some of its cactus-like properties earlier in the evening.

"You and I and the Count will go into other matters fully to-morrow," he said. "As for Miss Dane, I shall clear up that difficulty without delay. Act as though you had never seen her before, and keep your ears open during dinner."

So it came to pass that Evelyn, who was mightily astonished and perplexed by the arrival of the two men concerning whom Warden had told her so much, was still more bewildered when Mr. Baumgartner availed himself of a lull in the conversation at the dinner-table to say casually:

"By the way, Miss Dane, is Langton, in Oxfordshire, near your people's place?"

"Yes," she said, wondering what the question signified.

"I suppose, then, you passed through it on your way home after quitting the *Sans Souci* at Cowes?"

"Oh, yes. Langton is our station."

"Ah! What a small world it is! A friend of mine, Mr. James G. Hertz, of Boston, is staying there now. I suppose you did not chance to meet him?"

"No. Our village is three miles away, and that is a long distance in the country."

And, in truth, Mr. James G. Hertz, of Boston, who was buried in Boston, could tell of yet more impassable gulfs.

Rosamund Laing was sitting next to Figuero. She noticed the eager attention with which he followed this trivial bit of talk, though his limited knowledge of English rendered most of the lively chatter at the table unintelligible.

"Were you in Cowes during the regatta week, Senhor Figuero?" she asked.

It was a reasonable deduction from his presence at Lochmerig, but she little guessed the devilish purpose

engendered in that alert brain by her aimless inquiry. The Portuguese felt that he was at a disadvantage among the gay throng gathered under Baumgartner's roof. His nimble wits were dulled by the barrier of language. It put him outside the pale. Things might be occurring which he ought to know, but which were hidden from him owing to this drawback. In the beautiful woman by his side he might find an excellent go-between if only he could command her interest. Was that old flame quite quenched in her heart, he mused? She had married a rich man, but had she forgotten — did any woman ever forget — her first love? He thought not. At any rate, here was an opening provided by the gods.

"I lib for Cowes one-time, senora," he murmured, "an' I see somet'ing dere dat I tell you if you not vexed."

"Why should I be vexed?" she said, smiling at the odd expressions, though she was quite conversant with the *lingua franca* of the coast.

"You 'member dem Captain Warden?"

"Of course I do."

"An' you keep secret dem t'ing I tell you?"

"Where Captain Warden's affairs are concerned, I shall certainly not discuss him or them."

Figuero paid no heed to the intentional snub.

"You understan' better w'en I tole you dem secret. You promise not speak 'im any one?"

"Well — yes."

"He fit for marry dem Mees Dane."

"Don't be idiotic."

Mrs. Laing could not help it. She was so startled that she raised her voice, and more than one of her neighbors wondered what the sallow-faced stranger had said that evoked the outburst. Figuero looked annoyed. He was not prepared for such vehement repudiation of his news. Fortunately, the Honorable Billy Thring was giving a realistic account of his failure to secure an heiress during a recent wife-hunting tour in America — he tried lots of 'em, he explained, but they all said he must kill off at least one brother and two healthy nephews before they would risk marryin' a prize dude like him — so Rosamund's emphatic cry passed almost unheeded amidst the laughter evoked by Thring's exploits.

"You fit for chop," muttered the Portuguese sarcastically. "You fit for fool palaver. You plenty-much silly woman."

"But what you say cannot be true," she half whispered, and the man's astute senses warned him that it was dread, not contempt, that drew the protest from her lips.

"I fit for tell you Warden make wife palaver wid dem girl at Cowes. If you no b'lieve me, make sof' mouf an' ax Mees Dane."

Then the woman remembered Warden's anxiety to return to the Isle of Wight. He had not written to her or to Lady Hilbury during the past month, and this fact, trivial as a pin-prick before, now became a rankling wound.

"You keep dem secret?" went on Figuero, watching her closely.

"Why did you tell me?" she retorted.

"Coss I no want Warden marry dem girl. Savvy?"

"Do you want to marry her yourself?" she asked, with a bitterness that showed how deeply she was hurt.

He grinned, and wetted his thin lips with his tongue.

"You t'ink I tired goin' by lone?" he said.

"What is your motive? Why do you choose me as a confidant?"

Figuero suddenly became dense.

"I tell you leetle bit news," he said. "Dat is English custom. W'en we chop one-time palaver set. But you no say Figuero tole you dem t'ing."

Rosamund did not reply. She endeavored to eat, and entered into conversation with a man near her. The Honorable Billy was ending his story.

"So I am still eligible," he was saying. "I went to America full of hot air, and came back with cold feet. But I learned the language — eh, what?"

That night, in the drawing-room, Mrs. Laing carried out the opening move in a campaign she had mapped out for herself. If Figuero's story were true, she would smite and spare not. If it were untrue, Evelyn would be the first to deny it, and Rosamund trusted to her own intuition to discover how far such denial might be credited.

A man who was talking to Evelyn was summoned to a bridge table, and Rosamund took his place unobtrusively.

"Then you really were on board the *Sans Souci* at Cowes, Miss Dane?" she began, with a friendly smile.

"Yes," said Evelyn, at a loss to determine why her brief sojourn in the Solent should attract such widespread attention.

"And you met Captain Warden there?"

The attack was so direct and unexpected that the younger woman blushed and flinched from it. Still, she was not to be drawn into admissions like a frightened child.

"I met several people on the island," she said. "Cowes is a crowded place during regatta week."

"Oh, come now," purred the smiling Rosamund, "one does not forget a man of Arthur Warden's type so readily — and after a violent flirtation, too! You see, I know all about it. Little birds whisper these things. Arthur did not tell me when he came to see me in town. Of course, he wouldn't, but there are always kind-hearted people willing enough to gossip if they think they are annoying one."

There was sufficient innuendo in this brief speech to justify Mrs. Laing's worst estimate of scandalmongers. Not one barbed shaft missed its mark. If words could wound, then Evelyn must have succumbed, but the injuries they inflict are not always visible, and she kept a stiff upper lip, though her heart raced in wild tumult.

"The inference is that you are far more interested in Captain Warden's visits to Cowes than I or any other person can pretend to be," she said slowly.

She meant the cold-drawn phrase to hurt, and in that she succeeded, though her own voice sounded in her ears as if it had come from afar.

"Well, perhaps you ought to be told that he and I are engaged," said Rosamund, stung to a sudden fury of lying. "Don't imagine I bear malice. You are sweetly pretty, and Arthur is so susceptible! But he is also rather thoughtless. We were pledged to each other years ago, but were kept apart by — by a mother's folly. Now I am free, and he came back to me, though I had to insist that at least a year should elapse between my husband's death and the announcement of our engagement. All our friends know our sad story, and would forgive some measure of haste, but one has to consider the larger circle of the public."

Then, indeed, Evelyn's blood seemed to chill in her veins. The room and its occupants swam before her eyes, and the pain of repression became almost unbearable, yet she was resolved to carry off the honors in this duel unless she fainted.

"I gather that you are warning me against Captain Warden's thoughtlessness, as you term it?" she said, compelling each word at the bayonet's point, as it were.

"Oh, I was not speaking seriously, but we can let it go at that."

"And you wish me to understand that you are his promised wife?"

"There, at least, I am most emphatic," and Rosamund laughed, a trifle shrilly, perhaps, for a woman so well equipped with the armor of self-conceit.

"I suppose, then, that the late Mr. Laing has been dead a year, as I form one of that larger circle whose favorable opinion you court?"

For an instant Rosamund's black eyes flashed angrily. She had expected tears and faltering, not resistance.

"I only meant to do you a good turn, yet on the raw," she sneered.

"Pray do not consider me at all. By your own showing, I have no grievance — no *locus standi*, as the lawyers say — but, since you have gone out of your way to give a mere stranger this interesting information, I wish to be quite sure of the facts. For instance, let us suppose that I have the honor of Captain Warden's acquaintance — am I at liberty to write and congratulate him?"

"That would place me in a false position."

"Ah. Is there nothing to be said for me? You spoke of a 'violent flirtation,' I think. If I may guess at the meaning of a somewhat crude phrase, it seems to imply a possible exchange of lovers' vows, and one of the parties might be misled — and suffer."

"We women are the sinners most frequently."

"I do not dispute your authority, Mrs. Laing. I only wish to ascertain exactly what I am free to say to Captain Warden?"

"Tell him you met me, and that I am well posted in everything that occurred at Cowes. And, for goodness' sake, let me see his reply. It will be too killing to read Arthur's verbal wrigglings, because he is really clever, don't you think?"

Somehow, despite the steely tension of every nerve, Evelyn caught an undertone of anxiety in the jesting words. Her rival was playing a bold game. It might end in complete disaster, but, once committed to it, there was no drawing back.

"The proceedings at Cowes were open to all the world," Evelyn could not help saying. "Even you, with your long experience, might fail to detect in them any trace of the thoughtlessness you deplore."

"Then you have met him elsewhere?"

Evelyn, conscious of a tactical blunder, colored even more deeply with annoyance, though again she felt that her tormentor was not so sure of her ground as she professed to be. Every woman is a born actress, and Evelyn precipitated a helpful crisis with histrionic skill.

"The whole story is yours, not mine, Mrs. Laing," she said quietly. "Perhaps, if you apply to your half-caste informant, he may fill in further details to please you."

At that moment the Honorable Billy Thring intervened. He was one of those privileged persons who can say anything to anybody without giving offense, and he broke into the conversation now with his usual frank inanity.

"I find I've bin lookin' for a faithful spouse in the wrong direction, Mrs. Laing," he chortled. "Barkin' up the wrong tree, a Chicago girl called it. What a thorough ass I was to spin that yarn at dinner with you in the room. Will you be good, an' forget it?

Don't say I haven't got an earthly before the flag falls."

"What in the world are you talking about?" cried Rosamund, turning on him with the sourest of society smiles.

"It sounds like the beginning of a violent flirtation," said Evelyn, yielding to the impulse that demanded some redress for the torture she had endured.

"Right you are, Miss Dane," said Billy. "By gad, that clears the course quicker than a line of policemen. You see, Mrs. Laing, I really must marry somebody with sufficient means for both of us. I have expensive tastes, and my noble dad gave me neither a profession nor an income. So what is a fellow to do?"

"You flatter me," said Rosamund tartly. "Unfortunately I have just been telling Miss Dane that I am *hors de concours*, as they put it in the Paris exhibitions."

"That is the French for 'you never know your luck,' Mr. Thring," cried Evelyn, with a well-assumed laugh. "Mrs. Laing may change her mind, too, not for the first time."

Without giving her adversary a chance to retaliate, she darted away to join Beryl Baumgartner, and soon seized an opportunity to retreat to her own room. Once safely barricaded behind a locked door, she bowed before the storm. Flinging herself on her knees by the bedside, she wept as though her heart would break. It was her first taste of the bitter cup that is held out to many a girl in her position, and its gall was not diminished because she still believed that Arthur

Warden loved her. How could she doubt him, when each passing week brought her a letter couched in the most endearing terms? Only that morning had she heard from him at Ostend, whither the *Nancy* had flown after making a round of the Norfolk Broads. He described his chances of speedy promotion once the threatened disturbance in West Africa had spent itself, and, oddly enough, reminded her of his intention to curtail his furlough so as to permit of a visit to Rabat in a coasting steamer before going to Madeira on his way to the Protectorate.

Not a word did he say of the Baumgartners, or their queer acquaintances of the Isle of Wight. It was tacitly agreed between them that Evelyn should not play the rôle of spy on her employers, and, indeed, until that very day there was little to report save the utmost kindness at their hands.

Why, then, it may be urged, did she weep so unrestrainedly? and only the virgin heart of a woman who loves can answer. She feared that Rosamund Laing was telling the truth when she spoke of a prior engagement. She knew that Warden had said nothing at Plymouth of meeting Rosamund in London, and she was hardly to be blamed for drawing the most sinister inference from his silence. Did he dread that earlier entanglement? He was poor, and she was poor; how could he resist the pleading of one so rich and beautiful as her rival?

In short, poor Evelyn passed a grievous and needlessly tortured hour before she endeavored to compose

herself for sleep, and she was denied the consolation of knowing that the woman who destroyed her happiness was pacing another room like a caged tigress, and striving to devise some means of extricating herself from the morass into which Figuero's tidings and her own rashness had plunged her.

CHAPTER VIII

SHOWING HOW MANY ROADS LEAD THE SAME WAY

NEXT day, her mind restored to its customary equipoise, Evelyn thought she would be acting wisely if she gave Warden some hint of recent developments. Too proud to ask for an explicit denial of Rosamund Laing's claim, she saw the absurdity of letting affairs drift until the hoped-for meeting at Madeira. At first, she thought of resigning her post as Beryl's companion, and returning to Oxfordshire, but she set the notion aside as unreasonable and unnecessary. Most certainly Warden should not be condemned unheard. Without pressing him for a definite statement with regard to Mrs. Laing, it was a simple matter to put the present situation before him in such guise that he could not choose but refer to it. So, after drafting a few sentences, and weighing them seriously, she incorporated the following in a letter of general import:

"Yesterday we had three new arrivals whose names must appeal to you powerfully. First, a Mrs. Rosamund Laing came here from London, and she lost no time in telling me, among other things, that she was aware of our meeting at Cowes. Her informant, I am sure, was Miguel Figuero, and you will be even

more astonished to learn that he and Count von Rippenbach turned up by the same train as Mrs. Laing. The latter, by the way, said that you called on her at Lady Hilbury's when in London. Is that true? There are some hidden forces in motion at Lochmerig which I do not understand. Mr. Baumgartner tackled me openly at dinner with regard to my journey from Cowes to Oxfordshire. We know from Peter that Figuero saw us together that morning, and your Portuguese friend evidently recognized me at once. But Mr. Baumgartner's pointed reference to Langton as my destination was rather puzzling. How does it strike you? I expect my news will prove rather in the nature of a thunderbolt, and that is usually a very striking article. I assure you I am somewhat shaken myself. Mrs. Laing's personal attributes remind one of those galvanic batteries you see at fairs in the country — the more you try to endure her magnetic influence, the greater your collapse."

Before sealing the envelope, she re-read Warden's latest letter. She even read it aloud, and the straightforward, honest, loving words assumed a new significance. Then she turned to her own effusion, and viewed it critically. To her surprise, she detected a jarring, somewhat cynical, note in those passages which she regarded as all-important. To her judgment, events in the near future would follow a well-defined course. Her lover would say whether or not he had met Mrs. Laing in London, and give the clearest reasons for his omission of her name from the subse-

quent recital of his adventures. Evelyn would count the hours until that reply reached her hands. Perhaps Mrs. Laing's curiosity anent Warden's skill in "wriggling" would then be sated. She might even give an exhibition of the wriggler's art in her own behalf.

Evelyn refused to admit now that she had ever yielded to doubt or anxiety. The hysterical outburst of last night was natural, perhaps, under the circumstances, but quite nonsensical. Even Warden himself must be made to believe that Mrs. Laing was only indulging an exuberant sense of humor in claiming his fealty. Meaning, therefore, to tone down any apparent asperity in the paragraph referring to the three newcomers, she added a few lines beneath her signature.

"The Men of Oku have not yet appeared. I am longing to see them. They are really the most picturesque villains in the piece. I am just going for a stroll by the side of the loch, and I shall not be a little bit alarmed if I find a decorated calabash sailing in with the tide."

There is nothing new in the fact that the most important item in a woman's letter is often contained in a postscript, but never did the writer of a harmless and gossipy missive achieve such amazing results as Evelyn Dane brought to pass by the words she scribbled hurriedly after the magic letters "P.S."

For others than Evelyn Dane were taking thought that morning. Baumgartner, von Rippenbach, and

Figuero — locked in the library, and seated round a small table drawn well away from the door — were settling the final details of a scheme that aimed at nothing less than a very grave alteration in the political map of the world, while Rosamund Laing was planning an enterprise which should have an equally marked effect in the minor sphere of her own affairs.

Yet the fortunes of these five people gathered at Lochmerig, and of many millions in other parts of the earth, were absolutely controlled by one of those trivial conditions which appear to be so ludicrously out of proportion with ultimate achievement.

Baumgartner, being a rich man, objected to delay where his interests were concerned. Refusing to await the tardy coming of a country postman, he kept a groom in the village to which the mails were brought by train, and it was this man's duty to ride in each day with the post-bag for Lochmerig Lodge and return some hours later with the first out-going budget. The house letters were dropped into a box in the entrance hall, and a notice intimated that the time of clearance was at noon. To an unscrupulous woman, such an arrangement offered the means to do ill deeds that makes ill deeds done. Rosamund, ready to dare anything now to save herself from contumely, actually set out to find Evelyn and taunt her into an admission that she had written to Warden.

"Miss Dane is not in the house, madam," said the London footman on duty at the door. "She went out some time since — in that direction," and he pointed

toward the glistening firth that brought the North Sea into the heart of Inverness.

Mrs. Laing pouted prettily.

"Oh, dear!" she sighed. "I do hope she has not forgotten to write. I shall never find her in time. *Did* you happen to notice if she posted a letter?"

The footman sought inspiration by stroking his chin.

"Yes, madam," he announced, after a pause. "I'm almost certain Miss Dane went to the box. Yes, I'm sure of it."

Madam was very much obliged, and tipped him half-a-crown, informing him with a most charming smile that she did not on any account wish Miss Dane to believe that she was suspected of forgetfulness. It was then some few minutes after eleven, and this gracious lady was sympathetic enough to inquire if the footman did not become very tired of remaining on duty so many hours in one place.

"Oh, it's nothing compared with London, ma'am," said he. "Here we have sunshine — if the weather is fine — an' fresh air all the time. I only came on duty at nine o'clock, an' I go off at 11.30 for the first servants' dinner."

Mrs. Laing was talking to Billy Thring in the hall when the postman groom came to clear the letter-box. She darted forward with that irresistible smile of hers.

"I'm so glad I happened to be standing here," she exclaimed. "I have just remembered that I have stupidly left out of a letter the very thing I most wanted to say. It would never have occurred to me if I hadn't

seen you. The letter is addressed to Captain Warden. May I have it?"

The man was Baumgartner's servant. He had never before set eyes on Mrs. Laing, but he knew the Honorable Billy quite well, so he raised no objection to this smartly dressed lady's eager search for her incomplete letter. Though her hands fumbled somewhat, she soon picked it out.

"Here it is!" she cried delightedly, "this one — Captain Arthur Warden, Poste Restante, Ostend. Now, that will save me a heap of trouble. It *was* so nice of you to come in at the right moment. You have saved me a lot of trouble."

The groom grinned as he pocketed half-a-crown. Some ladies were easy pleased, to be sure. Even Billy Thring, experienced hunter of gilded brides, was bewildered by Mrs. Laing's excited manner.

"Seems to me I've made a killin'," he mused when she gushed herself away. "I s'pose old Baumgartner can be relied on. He is all there as a rule when he talks dollars an' cents, but he's a perfect rotter every other way. By gad, I'll kid him into wearin' kilts before the end of the month."

The notion tickled him. He lit a cigarette and strolled out through the open door. A glorious sweep of moorland and forest spread beyond the loch, whose wavelets lapped the verges of the sloping lawn and gardens. A little to the left the *Sans Souci* lay at her moorings. A steam launch was tied to a neat landing-stage. A string of horses and moor ponies returning

from exercise crossed a level pasture at the head of the loch. The letter-carrying groom was clattering down the broad carriage drive toward the distant station, and a couple of gardeners were cutting and rolling the green carpet of grass in front of the house.

"He talks of buyin' this property," communed the Honorable Billy, who was thirty-five and had never earned a penny in his life. "Can't be ten years older than me, though he looks sixty, bein' podgy. Now, why can't I have a stroke of luck an' rake in a stack? Then I might have a cut-in for the giddy widow."

Evelyn's trim figure emerged from a tree-shrouded path. She walked with a lithe elegance that pleased Mr. Thring's sporting eye.

"Or marry a girl like *that*," he added. The wild improbability of ever achieving any part of this fascinating programme brought a petulant frown to his handsome, vacuous face.

He strode up to one of the gardeners, a red-whiskered Caledonian, stern and wild.

"Where the devil is everybody?" he yawned. "No shootin', no yachtin', not a soul in the billiard-room — where's the bloomin' crowd?"

The dour Scot looked at him pityingly.

"Aiblins some are i' bed," he said, "an' there's ithers wha ocht to be i' bed."

"Bully for you, Rob Roy," cried Thring, who never objected to being scored off. "Aiblins some people are cuttin' grass wha ocht to be under it, because they don't know they're alive, eh what?"

"Man, but ye're shairp the day," retorted the gardener. "Whiles I'm thinkin' there's a guid pig-jobber lost in you, Maister Thring."

"Pig-jobber, you cateran! Why pigs?"

"Have ye no heerd tell that fowk a bit saft i' the heid have a wonderfu' way wi' animals, an' pigs are always a fine mairket."

"A bit heavy, McToddy. Trem yer whuskers an' change yer trousies for a kelt, an' mebbe ye'll crack a joke wi' less deeficulty."

The under-gardener chortled, for the Honorable Billy could imitate the Scots dialect with an unction that was decidedly mirth-provoking.

"Ma name's no McToddy," began the other.

"Well, then, McWhusky. I ken the noo from yer rid neb that there's michty little watter in yer composition."

Snorting defiance, but not daring to pour forth the wrath that boiled up in him, the man pushed a mowing-machine savagely across the lawn.

"Routed!" smiled Billy. "Bannockburn is avenged!"

"What is amusing you, Mr. Thring?" asked Evelyn, who had walked over the grass unheard.

"I have just discovered my lost vocation," he said. "I am a buffoon, Miss Dane, an idle jester. The only difference between me and a music-hall comedian is that my humor is not remunerative."

"Why, when I left you last night you were on the verge of proposing to Mrs. Laing, a most serious undertaking."

"Jolly nice woman, Mrs. Laing. No nonsense about her. We've bin together the last half hour, an' I'm under the starter's orders, at any rate."

"Why not go in and win?" demanded Evelyn, taking a kindly interest in the Honorable one's matrimonial prospects. If he and Mrs. Laing made a match of it, that would provide a very agreeable close to a disquieting incident.

"I'm afraid it'll only be to make the runnin' for some other Johnny," sighed he. "I was gettin' along like a house a-fire, when all at once she remembered she hadn't said what she wanted to say in a letter to a Captain somebody at Ostend, an' off she waltzed to her room. She's probably writin' sweet nothings to him now. Same old story — Billy Thring left at the post. Gad, that's funny! See it, eh, what?"

Thring was so amused by his own wit that he did not notice the expression of pain and fear that drove the brightness from Evelyn's face. But she herself was conscious of it, and looked away lest he should peer into her eyes, and wonder. So Mrs. Laing was writing to Arthur! She knew his address! How strange, how unutterably strange, that he had not once mentioned her name! The girl, as in a dream, affected to be watching a boy, the son of the village post-mistress, coming up the avenue. For the sake of hearing her own voice in such commonplace words as she might dare to utter, she drew her companion's attention.

"Here is our telegraph messenger," she said.

Thring glanced at his watch.

"It's for me," he announced. "There's a chap at Newmarket who is the champion loser-finder of the world, an' I'm one of his victims. This is Leger day, an' if you wait a moment I'll put you onto a stiff 'un, sure thing. Then you must turn bookmaker at lunch, and win gloves right and left — in pairs, in fact. I'll stand your losses if my prophet has gone mad an' sent a winner."

The boy made straight for him, and commenced to unfasten the pouch slung to his belt.

"See? I told you," laughed Billy, opening the message.

Evelyn hardly understood him. She was grateful for the high spirits that prevented him from paying any heed to the tears trembling under her drooping eyelashes. Despite her brave resolve to disregard Rosamund Laing's unbelievable story, a whole legion of doubts and terrors now trooped in on her. She asked herself how she could endure to live in the same house as her rival, for five long days, until Arthur's answer came. Would he receive the two letters by the same post? Could there be any real foundation for her rival's boast? The thought made her sick at heart. Fighting down her dread, she turned to Thring hoping to find a momentary oblivion in listening to his cheerful nonsense.

She found oblivion, indeed, but not in the shape she anticipated. Shading his eyes with one hand and holding the telegram in the other, her companion was

gazing at it in a dazed way. His cheeks were bloodless, the hand gripping the scrap of flimsy paper shook as though he were seized with ague, his whole attitude was that of a man who had received an overwhelming shock.

"Mr. Thring!" she cried, startled beyond measure, "what has happened?"

"My God!" he wailed, with the tingling note of agony in his voice that comes most clearly from one whose lips are formed for laughter. "My God! And I was jesting about them only last night!"

"Oh, what is it?" she cried again, catching his arm because he swayed like one about to faint.

"Read!" he murmured. "Fairholme an' the two boys! May Heaven forgive me! To think that I should have said it last night of all nights!"

Evelyn took the telegram from his palsied fingers, and this is what she read:

"With deepest regret I have to inform you that the Earl of Fairholme and his two sons were killed in the collision at Beckminster Junction last evening. Their private saloon was being shunted when the down express crashed into it. Letters found on his lordship's body gave me your address. Every one here joins in profound sympathy. Please wire instructions. James Thwaite."

Scarce knowing what she said, and still clinging desperately to the stricken man at her side, Evelyn whispered:

"Are they your relatives?"

And the answer came brokenly.

"Don't you know? That's Ferdy and my nephews! And two such boys! Straight an' tall an' handsome. Good Lord! was that the only way?"

Then she realized the horror of it. The crushed society butterfly, who was like to fall to the ground but for her support, was now Earl of Fairholme. Calling Brown to her aid, they led him inside the house. The butler, impelled to disobey his master's strict injunctions, knocked at the library door, and told Baumgartner what had happened.

Von Rippenbach heard. He was a callous person, to whom the death of three Englishmen was of very slight consideration.

"The very thing!" he murmured. "Now you have your excuse. You can empty the place in twenty-four hours."

Rosamund Laing, whose white brows wore unseemly furrows, was writing and thinking in her own room when a maid brought her the news. Before her on the table was Evelyn's letter, and the sharp-eyed Scotch lassie saw that the lady nearly upset the inkstand in her haste to cover something with the blotting-pad. Rosamund was shocked, of course. Finding that Thring was leaving for the south almost immediately, she then and there wrote a sweetly sympathetic note, and had it taken to him.

"By the way," she said before the maid went out, "have you seen Mr. Figuero recently? I mean the dark-skinned man who came here yesterday."

Yes, he had just left the library with the master and another gentleman. Rosamund rose at once. If she were not greatly mistaken, Evelyn's harmless-looking postscript had given her a clue to the mystery of Figuero's presence in Baumgartner's house. She knew her West Africa, and the bad repute of Oku was one of her clearest memories. Yet she turned back at the door, took Evelyn's letter from her pocket, copied a portion of it, and locked the original in her jewel case.

The luncheon-gong sounded as she descended the stairs, so perforce she postponed the interview she promised herself with the Portuguese. And, for the success of her deep-laid schemes, it was as well. Sometimes there comes to the aid of evil-doers a fiend who contrives opportunities where human forethought would fail. Rosamund, embarked on a well-nigh desperate enterprise, suddenly found the way smoothed by Baumgartner's wholly unexpected announcement that business considerations compelled him to leave Lochmerig forthwith.

"My wife and I would have tried to arrange matters satisfactorily for our guests," he said, "but the gloom cast on our pleasant party by the unhappy tidings received this morning by one of our number renders it almost impossible for any of us to enjoy the remainder of a most memorable and delightful sojourn in Scotland."

He delivered himself of other platitudes, but Mrs. Baumgartner's dejected air and Beryl's sulky silence showed plainly enough that the millionaire's fiat was

unalterable. Polite murmurs of agreement veiled the chagrin of people who had a fortnight or more thrown on their hands without any prior arrangements. The meal was a solemn function. Everybody was glad when it ended.

Rosamund met Figuero in the hall.

"I am going to the village," she said. "Will you walk there with me?"

He caught the veiled meaning of the glance, and agreed instantly. When they were clear of the house, she commenced the attack.

"Why are you and Count von Rippenbach and three men of Oku in England?" she asked.

She did not look at Figuero. There was no need. He waited a few seconds too long before he laughed.

"You make joke," he said.

"Do I? It will be no joke for you when Captain Warden informs the Government, if he has not done that already."

"Why you say dem t'ing?" he growled, and she was fully aware of the menace in his voice.

"You told me what you were pleased to consider a secret last night. Very well, I am willing to trade. Captain Warden knows what you are doing. He probably guesses every item of the business you and the Count were discussing so long and earnestly with Mr. Baumgartner in the library before lunch. Oh, please don't interrupt" — for Figuero, driven beyond the bounds of self-control, was using words better left to the Portuguese tongue in which they were uttered

— "I am not concerned with your plots. They never come to anything, you know. If either Count von Rippenbach or Mr. Baumgartner had your history at their finger's ends as I have, they would drop you like a hot cinder. Yet, I am ready to bargain. Help me, and I will keep my information to myself."

"What you want, den?"

She glanced at him, and was surprised to see that his face was livid, almost green with rage and perplexity. It must be a grave matter — this jumble of hints in Evelyn's letter.

"Can you read English?" she asked, after a pause.

"Yes, leetle piece — better as I can make palaver."

"Read that then."

She handed him the copy of that part of the fateful letter that alluded to himself and his affairs. He puzzled it out, word by word.

"Where him lib for?" he demanded.

"That was written by Miss Dane and intended for Captain Warden. I came by it, no matter how, and I mean to make use of it in some way."

With a rapid movement, he stuffed the sheet of notepaper into a pocket.

"I keep dem letter," he announced.

"Certainly. It is only a copy. Savvy? I have the real one safely put away."

Figuero swallowed something. His thin lips were bloodless, and his tongue moistened them with the quick darting action of a snake. Rosamund, who was really somewhat afraid, trusted to the daylight and the

fact that they were traversing an open road, with cottages scattered through the glen.

"You cannot humbug me," she went on, "but I want to assure you again that I am no enemy of yours. Now, listen. I mean to marry Captain Warden, but I have reason to believe that he is engaged, promised, to Miss Dane. I am trying to stop that, to break it off. Can you help?"

"You ask hard t'ing — in dis place. In Africa, we get Oku man make ju-ju."

She shuddered. The cold malevolence in his words recalled stories she had heard of those who had died with unaccountable suddenness when "Oku man make ju-ju."

"I don't mean that," she cried vehemently. "Tell me what is taking place, and how it will affect Captain Warden. Then I can twist events to my own purpose. I can warn him, perhaps prove myself his friend. Above all — where are you going to-morrow? Mr. Baumgartner sails in the *Sans Souci*, I hear. Does Miss Dane go with him, or is she to be sent away because she is aware of your plans?"

Figuero did not answer during a whole minute.

He saw light, dimly, but growing more distinct each instant. Warden was a deadly personality in the field against him, and his active interference was now assured beyond cavil. But, with two women as foils, both beautiful, and one exceedingly well equipped with money, there was still a chance of circumventing the only man he feared.

"You steal dem letter?" he said unexpectedly.

"At any rate, it has not gone to Captain Warden," was the acid reply.

"An' you write 'im. What you say?"

"Oh, nothing that affects the case."

"You tole him me here?"

"No. That can wait," which statement, as shall be seen, was strictly untrue.

"Well, den, dem yacht lib for — for somewheres tomorrow. Dem girl, Mees Dane, go wid me. You tole him dat t'ing as you say las' night. I make wife palaver to dem girl."

"What good will that do?" she said. "In a week, ten days, he will hear from her again."

"No. I take dem letter. You gib me Captain Warden writin', an' I keep eye for dat. Savvy?"

"But can you carry out what you promised?"

"Two, t'ree months, yes. After dem yacht lib for Madeira, no. P'raps dem girl be wife den."

Rosamund's dark eyes narrowed to two tiny slits. If Figuero could really keep Warden and Evelyn apart during so long a period, the utterly hopeless project on which she had embarked in a moment of jealous rage might become feasible. Of course, the suggestion that he would marry Evelyn was preposterous, but there was no reason why she should hurt his pride by telling him so. Her heart throbbed madly, while her active brain debated the pros and cons of the all-important question — should she post the letter already written? Yes. It was the outcome of her earliest thought. She

would follow it up with another in different strain. The two would be vastly more convincing than one, and the dates would have a significance that no mere contriving could impart.

By this time they were at the post-office, from which mails were dispatched by a later train than that caught by the groom. Rosamund dropped her letter in the box. She was quite pale with suppressed excitement. Her boats were burnt. She heard the fall of the envelope into the receptacle, and the appalling notion possessed her that the sound resembled the fall of earth on a coffin. She breathed heavily, and pressed a hand to her bosom. Figuero was watching her.

"Now you done dem t'ing," he said, "you dash me some money."

She started. Did he mean to levy blackmail for his services?

"Why?" she asked, summoning all her strength of character to meet his gaze without flinching.

"Me buy present for dem girl. If I make wife palaver dat cost many dollar."

"I am not buying your help. You trade with me one thing for the other. If you refuse, I write to the Government about the men of Oku."

The Portuguese laughed more naturally than she had yet heard him. If his arch-enemy, Arthur Warden, was well acquainted with the mission he and the chiefs had undertaken, this pretty and passionate woman counted for very little in the scale against him.

"You dash me one hunner' poun'," he said cheerfully.

"Jus' dat, no mo'. If you say 'no,' dem girl no lib for yacht. Mr. Baumgartner say go one-time. Me tell 'im take dem girl — savvy?"

Mrs. Laing savvied. She gave him thirty pounds — all she could spare from her purse — and promised to send the balance to an address in London. He was fully satisfied. He was sure she would not fail him. When he needed further supplies she would pay willingly. In an intrigue based on such lines Miguel Figuero was an adept.

CHAPTER IX

WARDEN BEGINS HIS ODYSSEY

EVELYN'S weekly letter from Scotland usually arrived by the mail-boat due at Ostend about three o'clock in the afternoon. Warden, sitting on the *plage* among a cosmopolitan crowd that delighted in its own antics, watched the steamer from Dover picking its way along the coast and into the harbor. He was dining with a friend that evening in one of the big hotels on the sea front. He could call for his letters after he had dressed — meanwhile, he had an hour or more at his disposal, and he was weary of the frolics of Monsieur, Madame et Bébé, and of a great many other people who came under a less domestic category.

To kill time, he strolled into the Casino and drank a cup of the decoction which Belgians regard as tea. Then he went to the so-called Club to look at the gamblers. Play did not appeal to him, but he had joined the Cercle Privé because some men he knew went there regularly for baccarat. To-day, to dispel the *ennui* of existence between meals, a German baron was opening banks of five hundred louis each, and losing or winning money with a bored air. He had just closed one bank successfully, and the table was

set for another, when a young American, bright-eyed, clean-shaven, and pallid, stirred the pulses of both onlookers and players by crying, "Banco!" Even in Ostend one does not often see four hundred pounds won or lost at a single coup. Warden, whose sympathies were against the stolid banker, stood by the side of the younger man until the incident was ended.

There was no waiting. The challenger, impassive as a Red Indian, gave a bundle of notes to the croupier, who counted them. The baron dealt the two tableaux, and his adversary stooped and picked up the first.

"*Huit!*" he said, throwing the cards face upwards on the table. He took the second pair.

"*Neuf!*"

An excited buzz of talk rose around the board. With a blasé smile, the banker showed his cards — two queens.

"*Peste!*" cried a Frenchman, "*toujours on souffre pour les dames!*"

Some few laughed; the German, more phlegmatic than ever, opened a pocketbook and started a fresh bank for the same amount, while the American collected his stake and winnings. He was stuffing the notes into a pocket when he caught Warden's glance.

"That's the easiest way of making two thousand dollars I've ever struck," he said.

"But you stood to lose the same amount," said Warden.

"Why, yes. The only difference between me and the fellow who puts up with this beastly atmosphere

every day for a month is that *he* fritters away his money at five or ten dollars a pop, while *I* hit or miss at the first time of asking."

"You won't play any more, then?"

"No, sir. Me for the tall timbers with the baron's wad. 'Lucky at cards, unlucky in love,' you know, and I've just heard that my best girl has made a date with the other fellow."

He walked away, erect, alert, and self-possessed. Warden strolled to a roulette board.

"I wonder if that is true," he mused.

Instinctively his hand went to his pocket, and he staked a louis on 29, the year of his age. Up came 29, and he won thirty-five louis. He was so astonished that he bent over the shoulders of a lady seated near the foot of the table, and began mechanically to draw in the five-hundred franc note and ten gold pieces that were pushed by a croupier's rake close to his own coin.

"But, monsieur," whispered the lady, who was French, and gave slight heed to convention, "certainly you will follow your luck!"

"Why not?" he answered.

Knowing that the maximum on a number was nine louis, he was on the point of leaving that amount on 29, when he remembered that Evelyn's age was twenty. To the surprise of his self-appointed counselor, he told the croupier to transfer the gold to the new number, while the note went on the 19–24 *transversale*. Thus, if he lost, he was still a louis to the good, and the American's consoling adage was robbed of its sting.

The roulette whirred round, the marble danced madly across diamonds and slots. Checking its pace, it hopped, hopped, hopped — into 20 — and the Frenchwoman nearly became hysterical. Warden received so much money that he lost count. As a matter of fact, he had won just forty louis less than the cynic of the baccarat table. He deemed the example of the unknown philosopher too good not to be followed, so he gathered his gains and stakes, and left the room.

Now, most men would have felt elated at this stroke of luck, but Warden was not. Though it was very pleasant to be richer by nearly three hundred and seventy pounds, he wished heartily that this sudden outburst of the gambling mania had found its genesis in some other topic than the reputed ill fortune of a favored lover. The incident was so astounding that he began to search for its portent. For a few seconds, he saw in his mind's eye an evil leer on the black face hidden away in the *Nancy's* cabin, and it almost gave him a shock when he recalled the fact that both 29 and 20 were black numbers. But the light and gaiety of the streets soon dispelled these vapors, and he loitered in front of a jeweler's shop while planning a surprise for his beloved. He had not yet given her a ring. Their tacit engagement was so sudden, and their parting so complete since that never-to-be-forgotten night at Plymouth, that he now fancied, with a certain humorous dismay, that Evelyn might long have been anticipating the receipt of some such token. Well, she should own a ring that he could never have afforded

but for the kindly help of the Casino. There was one in the window marked "D'Occasion — 5,000 frs." It contained three diamonds fit for a queen's diadem. He wondered whether or not, under the circumstances, one should buy a second-hand ring. Would Evelyn care to wear an article, however valuable, that had once belonged to another woman? At any rate, the stones would require re-setting, and he was not afraid of being swindled in the purchase, because the jeweler evidently regarded this special bargain as a magnet to draw the eyes of passers-by to his stock.

Five minutes later, the ring reposed in a case in Warden's pocket, and he was making for the post-office. But there was no letter from Evelyn. There would have been, were it not locked in Mrs. Laing's writing-case, and Warden was no wizard that he should guess any such development in the bewildering tumult of events that was even then gathering around him. Nevertheless, the clerk gave him a letter — from the Colonial Office — asking that he should come to London with the least possible delay.

Though gratifying to a man eager for recognition in his service, the incidence of the request was annoying. At any other time in his career he would have left Ostend by the night mail. Now he resolved to wait until the morrow's midday service, and thus secure Evelyn's missive before his departure. He read between the lines of the brief official message clearly enough. Affairs were growing critical in West Africa. At best, his advice, at worst, his immediate return to

duty, was demanded. If the latter, by hook or by crook he would contrive to see Evelyn before he sailed for the south.

He telegraphed his change of plans to Evelyn, telling her to write to his flat in London, and asking her to wire saying whether or not a letter was *en route* to Ostend. He bade Peter bring the *Nancy* to Dover and there await orders, and then joined his friend, who was sympathetic when he heard that Warden must leave Ostend next day.

"You'll miss the racing," he said, "and that is a pity, because I know of one or two good things that would have paid for your holiday."

Warden laughed, and recounted his before-dinner experiences in the Casino.

"By gad!" cried the other, "I wish I'd been there. I know that German Johnny — let me see, he has a horse running to-morrow. Here is the programme — third race — Baron von Gröbelstein's 'Black Mask.' Eh, what? Oh, that is the gee-gee's name right enough, but it hasn't an earthly."

To cloak his amazement, Warden pretended to be interested in the entries. "Black Mask" was Number Thirteen on the card. He could not help smiling.

"I feel rather superstitious to-day," he said. "Will you back that horse for me?"

"Certainly, dear boy. But you are throwing your money away. It's a fifty to one shot."

"I don't mind. It is the Casino's money, anyhow."

"Very well. How much?"

Warden's pocket-book, reduced somewhat in bulk by the visit to the jeweler's, came in evidence again.

"Fifty louis," he said.

"My dear fellow, it's rank lunacy."

"Believe me, I shall not care tuppence if I lose."

"Oh, all right. Give me your address. I'll send you a telegram about four o'clock to-morrow. You'll never see your fifty any more."

Never before in his life had Warden acted the spendthrift, but any surprise he may have felt at his own recklessness was utterly dissipated when he received Rosamund Laing's letter next morning. Though its tone was studiously gossipy and cheerful, the tidings it contained were unpleasant enough to lend significance to the American's dictum. Its innuendoes, whether intentional or otherwise — and Warden was suspicious, for he had not forgotten certain traits of Rosamund's character — assumed a sinister aspect when there was neither letter nor telegram from Evelyn.

"My dear Arthur" — wrote this unwelcome correspondent — "I suppose I may address you in that manner after our once close friendship — you will think that marvels are happening when you hear that I am at Lochmerig. The real marvel is, however, that I should have obtained your address. Last evening Billy Thring — do you know him? — by the way, he is now Lord Fairholme, since that sad railway smash at Beckminster yesterday — well, Billy Thring spoke of you. He means to cut you out with your little governess friend. I don't blame you a bit, for

she is very pretty, but, without telling tales, I would warn you that the man who said that absence makes the heart grow fonder was certainly not a connoisseur in woman's hearts. Naturally, Fairholme flew south this morning, and that clears off one of your rivals temporarily. Still, there are others. I am only chaffing, of course, and I suppose you were chiefly amusing yourself at Cowes and elsewhere. *My* presence here is easily accounted for — I met the Baumgartners at Madeira last winter; and they invited me to their Scotch shooting. Isn't B. a funny little man? On the island they used to call him by his initials, I. D. B. — Illicit Diamond Buyer, you know.

"Now, why did you leave me to fish out your whereabouts by sheer accident? Naughty! Do write soon, and tell me when I shall see you. Oh, I was nearly forgetting. Recent arrivals included a Herr von Rippenbach and an old acquaintance of yours, Miguel Figuero. Isn't it odd that they should come here! And a little bird named Evelyn has whispered that the men of Oku are making ju-ju nearer home than the Benuë River. Please keep out of it, for your friends' sake, and especially for the sake of yours ever sincerely, Rosamund."

"P.S. Send a line, and I shall give you more news. R."

There was hardly a word in that innocent-looking note that was not a barbed shaft. Was it believable that Evelyn Dane, the girl whose eyes shone so divinely while he entrusted to her willing ears his hopes and

aspirations, should make him the butt of the ninnies gathered at Lochmerig? Yet, that allusion to the men of Oku inflicted a stab cruel as the thrust of an Oku spear. Who else but Evelyn could have revealed his interest in the visit of the negroes to England? And who was this Billy Thring — whose very name suggested inanity? True, Evelyn had mentioned him as one of the house party. "I find the Honorable One very amusing," she had said. "He is the clown of our somewhat dull circus." But there was no suggestion of friendliness other than the ordinary civilities of life under the same roof. Again, why had she not written, nor answered his telegram? He laid no great stress on these minor things. They became important only in the light of Rosamund's statements.

He read and re-read the letter while crossing the Channel. Before Dover was reached he had gone through identically the same thought-process as Evelyn herself two days earlier. He found malevolence in every line of Rosamund's epistle. It was meant to wound. Its airy comment was distilled poison, its assumed levity the gall of a jealous woman. Were it not for her wholly inexplicable and confusing allusion to the Oku chief's mission, he could have cast aside with a scornful laugh her sly hints as to Evelyn's faithlessness. Even then, puzzled and angry though he was, he remained true in his alliegance to his affianced wife.

"Why should there not be some devil's brew where such men as Figuero and Baumgartner foregather?" he asked himself. "It exists, as I well know, and

Rosamund Laing is just the woman to sip it. I wish now that I had insisted more firmly on Evelyn's removal from the Baumgartner gang. I was mad not to ask her to marry me at once. We could have managed somehow, and she would have borne the separation for a year or more."

Then it occurred to him that the two hundred pounds' worth of diamonds in his pocket would almost have furnished a country cottage, and, to crown all, there was the exquisite folly of the bet on a horse that his sporting friend described as a hopeless outsider. His misery was not complete till the memory of another jewel intruded itself — a ruby that had waited two hundred and fifty years for an owner. Certainly, Arthur Warden experienced a most perplexed and soul-tortured journey to London.

He drove straight to his flat. Two telegrams awaited him. One must be from Evelyn, of course. She had chosen to send a message there, rather than risk missing him at Ostend. But he was wrong. The first he opened read: "Baumgartner and everybody else have gone. I am coming to London. Staying at Savoy. Rosamund."

His brain was still confused by this strange substitution of one woman for another, when his eyes fell on the contents of the second telegram:

"Black Mask won. Took you forties. Congratulations, Dick."

The perplexity in his face attracted the sympathy of the hall porter.

"I 'ope you've had no bad news, sir," said the man.

Warden laughed with a harshness that was not good to hear.

"No," he said, "just the reverse. I backed a horse and he has won, at forty to one."

The hall porter, like most of his class, was a sportsman.

"Lord love a duck!" he cried, "that's the sort you read about but seldom see, sir. Where did he run — at Newmarket?"

"No, at Ostend."

The man's hopes of obtaining good "information" diminished, but he was supremely interested.

"*Wot* a price!" he exclaimed. "Did you have much on, sir?"

"Forty pounds."

"Forty pounds! Then you've won sixteen hundred quid!" and each syllable was a crescendo of admiration.

Warden threw the telegram on the floor. Though the last twenty-four hours had enriched him by nearly five years' pay, he was in no mood to greet his good fortune as it deserved.

"Yes," he sighed, "I suppose you are right. Unpack my traps, there's a good fellow. I am going out, and I want to change my clothes."

The hall porter obeyed, but he would have choked if speech were forbidden. He wanted to know the horse's name, how the gentleman had come to hear of him, was the money "safe," and other kindred items that goaded Warden to hidden frenzy. Yet the forced

attention thus demanded was good for him. He described "Black Mask" as "a Tartar of the Ukraine breed," and drew such a darksome picture of the precautions taken by the "stable" to conceal the animal's true form that the man regarded him as a veritable fount of racing lore.

Such a reputation, once earned, is not easily shaken off. When he went out, the hall porter and the driver of a hansom were in deep converse. He paid the cabman at the Colonial Office, and his mind was busy with other things when he was brought back to earth again.

"Beg pardon, sir," said cabby, "but would you mind tellin' me the best thing for the Cup."

"What Cup?" demanded Warden testily.

"The Liverpool Cup, sir."

"Beer, of course."

He escaped. But the cabman took thought. An eminent brewer's horse figured in the betting lists, so he drove back at once to interview the hall porter. A joint speculation followed, and two men mourned for many a day that they had not begged or borrowed more money wherewith to win a competence on that amazingly lucky tip.

Warden did not expect to find any one at the Colonial Office who would attend to him. The hour was nearly seven, and it is a popular theory that at four o'clock all secretaries and civil servants throw aside the newspapers and other light literature with which they beguile the tedium of official routine. He meant to report his

arrival in London, and learn from a door-keeper what time it would be advisable to call next day.

He was hardly prepared, therefore, to be received forthwith by a silver-haired, smooth-spoken gentleman, who asked him to recapitulate the main points of his conversation with the Under Secretary at the Foreign Office.

Somewhat mystified, Warden began his recital. After the first two sentences, the official nodded.

"Thank you, Captain Warden, I need not trouble you further," he said. "You see, we are not personally known to each other, and in such an exceedingly delicate matter as this threatened difficulty in Nigeria — wherein knowledge is confined to a very small circle — one has to be careful that one is speaking to the right man."

"Did you think it possible, then, that some stranger might have impersonated me?" demanded Warden, his eyes twinkling at the suggestion.

"Quite possible. I have done it myself twice, the first time successfully, the second to the complete satisfaction of our Minister abroad, but hardly to my own, as I had two fingers of my left hand shot off while making a dash for safety."

Certainly, reflected Warden, there were elements in the life of Whitehall that escaped public notice.

"We have sent for you because you are wanted at once in West Africa," went on the other. "Letters to and from the Governor of Northern Nigeria have culminated in a cablegram from the Governor asking

that you should be recalled from furlough. Though you are attached to the southern portion of the Protectorate, his Excellency has the highest appreciation of your tact and ability. He thinks you are the man best fitted to deal with the natives of the disturbed region. It is not proposed that you should return by the ordinary mail service. We assume that the departure of officers and others for Lagos is closely watched at the present crisis. A passage has been secured on a coasting steamer for a mythical personage named Alfred Williams. Initials on baggage or linen, therefore, cannot cause inquiry. Now, the *Water Witch* sails from Cardiff by Saturday afternoon's tide, and we would like Mr. Alfred Williams to go on board that morning."

Warden looked blankly at the speaker. It was then Thursday. It left him little more than a day in which to unravel the mystery that enveloped Evelyn and her whereabouts. A bitter rage welled up in his breast, but he controlled his face, and the official attributed his silence to the suddenness of his suggested departure.

"I am sorry that your leave should be spoiled in this fashion," continued the quiet voice. "But it is unavoidable. The thing presses. And I need scarcely tell you that when Government wants a man's service it is good for the man."

"I shall be on board the *Water Witch* on Saturday," said Warden.

Perhaps the lack of enthusiasm in his manner was puzzling, but the suave official paid no heed.

"And now for your instructions," he said. "The vessel touches at Cape Coast Castle before going on to Lagos. You will be met there by some officer whom you are acquainted with. He will tell you the exact position of affairs, and what, if any, developments have taken place in the meantime. He will also give you the Governor's views as to the way in which your experience of the natives can best be utilized. I leave it to you to take the necessary precautions to conceal your movements and identity, and I am authorized to hand you £250 to meet any expenses incidental to your mission. Your passage on the *Water Witch* is paid for, by the way."

Again the older man failed to understand why the young officer should laugh with the grim humor of one who bids fate do her worst. Certainly, the situation had in it some element of comedy. Gold was being showered on Warden from the skies — promotion and distinction were thrust upon him — yet he was miserable as any man in England that day.

"Something on his mind — is it a woman?" mused the shrewd official, and the time came when he remembered the idle fancy.

In the freedom of the street Warden soon recovered himself. Not even an all-absorbing passion — rendered more intense by reason of his self-contained nature — could deprive him of the habit of years. In the Colonial Office at the moment lay a letter from the Governor of Southern Nigeria commending him in the highest terms for his cool judgment, resource-

fulness, and decision. He showed these qualities now. He hurried to Charing Cross, and despatched three telegrams, one to Evelyn, begging her to communicate with him instantly, a second to his friend in Ostend, thanking him for his kindly offices and requesting that the money should be paid into a named bank, and the third to the Harbor Master at Dover, asking him to inform Peter Evans, of the pilot-cutter *Nancy*, that he must travel to London by the earliest train after arriving from Ostend.

Then he went to the Savoy.

Rosamund's telegram had been handed in at Lochmerig the previous night. It occurred to Warden that she must have written it about the time his message to Evelyn was delivered. If so, and it was true that the Baumgartner household had already departed on board the *Sans Souci*, there was an obvious question to be answered.

As he anticipated, Mrs. Laing was in the hotel. In fact, she was about to dine in her own room when Warden's card was brought to her. She hastened to meet him, all smiles and blushes.

"How awfully good of you to come so soon!" she cried. "And at just the right hour! I hate eating alone, but I dislike still more being at a table by myself in a big hotel. You can't have dined. Let us go to the café, and then it doesn't matter about one's toilette."

"I don't wish to disturb your arrangements" — he began, but she was not to be forced into a serious discussion at once.

"Who said anything about disturbance?" she rattled on. "You could not have met my wishes better if you had guessed them. Now, don't look so glum. It is not my fault that your pretty governess was ready to flirt with other men, is it? Come and eat, and I shall tell you all about it."

He fell in with her mood. A woman will dare anything when she loves or hates, and he credited Rosamund with excess in both directions. Yet it would be strange, he thought, were she playing some deep game not immediately discernible, if he did not unravel the tangled skein of her deceit.

"I got your letter, of course," he said when they were seated.

"Ah, then I guessed correctly. That is why you are disconsolate," she said, looking at him frankly.

"It may be. At present I am chiefly curious. How did you obtain my London address?"

"Didn't you telegraph it?"

"To Miss Dane — yes."

"You dear man, what would *you* have done if a telegram were brought to a remote place in the Highlands for a lady whom you knew was gone goodness knows where in a yacht?"

"Surely it might have been forwarded to her?"

"Yes, if you or I, or any other reasonable being, were the addressee. But the Baumgartners gave instructions that everything was to be sent to their London house, which is closed, except for a caretaker. Mrs. Baumgartner herself told me they did

not expect to be in town under a month or six weeks."

"Have they vanished into thin air?"

"Something of the kind. They spoke vaguely of a cruise round the Shetlands, but I am sure that was meant as a blind. They wouldn't take Figuero and von Rippenbach as their sailing companions for the mere fun of the thing, would they?"

"Did they offer no excuse to their guests?"

"Oh, yes. Billy Thring — sorry, but I must mention him — well, his brother's death was the ostensible reason. I don't believe a word of it. I. D. B. is not the man to break up a pleasant house party because one of its members has suffered a bereavement. There is something else going on. I am honestly feminine enough to want to know what it is. I was simply dying of curiosity yesterday when I saw Figuero and the dainty Evelyn in the garden, discussing things with bated breath."

Warden frowned. He could keep a tight rein on his emotions, but this was trying him high.

"Would you mind telling me how a man who is dining with a lady can best express polite incredulity at her statements?" he asked.

"Very neat," she retorted, "but in this instance you are the water and I the duck. If you think I am deliberately telling you untruths, why not choose some less exciting topic? How did you like Ostend? I adore it. The people amuse me — they are so naïvely shocking, or shocked, as the case may be. Did you

see that fat Frenchman who struts about in a ridiculously tight and glaring bathing suit?"

"Of course you want to talk about Lochmerig," he said quietly. "Now, Mrs. Laing, it will be wiser to speak in plain language. Evelyn Dane is my promised wife. If possible, I would marry her to-morrow. That is no figure of speech. If she were here now, and the law permitted, I would marry her within the hour. You know me well enough to believe that once my mind is made up I do not change. Well, then, why are you endeavoring to create discord between me and the woman I love?"

Rosamund flushed. She had expected him to say something of the kind, but it was none the less disagreeable in the hearing. The fury that convulsed her found a ready outlet in the tears that stood in her beautiful eyes.

"It is very unkind of you to blame me," she half sobbed. "How could I make up all these wicked inventions? I had never even heard the girl's name before I went to Lochmerig. It was her own foolish tongue that revealed things — about you — and the men of Oku — and — and — what you saw that night at Cowes. She is either very wicked or very thoughtless, Arthur. If you are engaged in some secret business for the Government, and she were really true to you, would she ever have spoken of it to Billy — to Lord Fairholme?"

Warden was beaten. He poured out a glass of wine and drank it. He felt that if he spoke at once his

voice might betray the agony of his soul. Ah, if only he might see Evelyn for five precious minutes! Better go to Africa with his dear idol shattered than carry with him the lingering torture of doubt.

"I think you were right when you switched our talk off to Ostend," he muttered at last. "May I give you a word of advice? Forget what you have just said. It is a dangerous problem — one not to be settled by women's tongues."

So they left it at that, and when they parted, not without a tacit understanding that they would meet again at the earliest opportunity — for Warden was obliged to be ambiguous in that respect — Rosamund was sure that she had gained some ground in a pitiless struggle. Warden was desperately unhappy. That was her second success. She had won the first move when the *Sans Souci* carried Evelyn off the field.

Early next morning Warden went to a shipping office, and the people there advised him to send a reply-paid telegram to the coast-guard station nearest Lochmerig. He soon received an answer. "The *Sans Souci* sailed Wednesday, 3 P.M. Destination believed Shetlands, but headed southeast by east."

He passed many hours in writing a full statement of everything that had taken place — including copies of Rosamund's letter and telegram, and a literal record of their conversation in the hotel — and enclosed the ring and the manuscript in a stout linen envelope. When Peter Evans came to him in the evening, he gave him the package and fifty pounds, with explicit

details as to its safeguarding and the reasons which governed his present decision.

"You are to find Miss Dane, no matter what the cost," he said. "You may hear of her at her home in Oxfordshire, or at this address, where you have my permission to open any letters that arrive during my absence. If you run short of money, or are compelled to take an expensive journey, apply to my bankers. I shall leave full instructions that your requirements are to be met when you explain them. The one thing I want you to do is to deliver this letter into Miss Dane's own hands."

Peter, somewhat awestricken by Warden's gravity, yet proud of the trust placed in him, promised obedience.

"Never fear, sir," he said. "If the *Sans Souci* is afloat on the seven seas I'll get her bearin's one way or another. Sink me! if I don't find that gal afore a month, I'll unship my prop, sell the *Nancy*, an' go to the wokkus."

In disposing of his belongings, Warden packed the gourd and the parchment among some heavy clothing which was useless in Africa. He told the hall porter exactly which portmanteaus he meant to take with him, but on arriving at Paddington Station at 4.30 A.M. on a cold morning, he found the bag containing the gourd and parchment piled with the rest of his goods on the platform.

He eyed it resentfully, but yielded.

"So you mean to stick to me!" he growled. "You mesmerized that sleepy scoundrel into carrying you

downstairs and depositing you on the roof of my cab. Very well. Let us see the adventure through in company."

He was chatting with the skipper of the *Water Witch* one day while the ship's position was being pricked off on the chart.

"You are keeping close in to the Spanish coast, Captain," said the passenger.

"Not particularly, Mr. Williams," was the reply.

"But I have always been under the impression that vessels bound for the West Coast headed for the Canaries?"

"So they do, if they're logged for a straight run. It happens this time, however, that my ole tub has to call in at Rabat and Mogador."

"At Rabat!" repeated Mr. Williams, seemingly staggered at the mere mention of the place.

"Yes, funny little hole. Ever bin there?"

"No."

"Well, p'raps you'll go ashore. If you do you'll see the queerest collection of humans you've ever set eyes on."

Mr. Williams turned and gazed at the horizon.

"I think I'm bewitched," he muttered.

"Wot's that?"

"Odd thing. I've been dreaming of Rabat!"

The captain grinned.

"When you've seen it you'll fancy it's a nightmare," he said.

CHAPTER X

HASSAN'S TOWER — AND THE COLONIAL OFFICE

WARDEN did not find Rabat so intolerable as the captain of the *Water Witch* led him to believe. Its streets were more regular and cleaner, or less dirty, than those of the average Moorish town. Its people seemed to be devoted to commerce — probably because they are not pure-blooded Moors, but of Jewish descent. That, at least, is the argument advanced by a man from Fez or Tafilat when he wants a heavier dowry with a Rabati bride.

From the roadstead, once the troublesome bar was crossed, the town looked attractive. Its white houses were enshrined in pretty gardens. Orchards, vineyards, and olive-groves brightened the landscape. To the north, on the opposite bank of a swift river, cultivated slopes stretched their green and gold to the far-off Zemmur mountains. A picturesque citadel, built by a renegade Englishman in the bad old days, commanded the harbor, and a spacious landing-place showed that the Rabatis opposed no difficulties to the export of their Morocco leather, carpets, Moorish slippers, and pottery.

The *Water Witch* entered the river soon after dawn,

and Warden was assured that she would not be able to clear her shipments until next forenoon at the earliest. He went ashore and was agreeably surprised at finding quite a large number of British and other European merchants' offices near the quay, while the shields of several Vice-Consuls and Consular Agents bespoke some semblance of law and order.

In a word, Rabat looked settled and prosperous. It was utterly out of keeping with the picture conjured up by the tattoo marks made by Domenico Garcia on the skin of Tommaso Rodriguez. Still the Hassan Tower was no myth. It was pointed out to him by an Englishman who had walked to the wharf to watch the landing of the ship's boat.

Pausing only to buy a strong chisel in a native shop, Warden strolled at once in the direction of the tomb. He would neither delay his search for the ruby, nor give much time to it. If he failed to identify the exact spot described in the parchment, or was unable to discover anything after a speedy examination, assuredly he would not spend several hours in tearing ancient masonry to pieces. Since leaving England, Warden had become a different man. Always a good-humored cynic, he was now perilously near the less tolerable condition of cynicism without good humor. Intellect began to govern impulse. Though his brain was wearied with endeavor to find a reasonable explanation of events, he was almost convinced that Evelyn must at least have committed the indiscretion of gossiping about her adventures in the Isle of Wight. If only

she had written! His heart kept harping on that! Why had she flown away with her employers without ever a sign that her thoughts were with the man she loved?

He wondered if Peter Evans had found her. If so, there would be news at Cape Coast Castle, for he had given his bankers explicit directions, and a member of the firm was a personal friend who would attend to cablegrams and letters.

The Hassan Tower stood on a height not far beyond the outermost city wall, Rabat being dignified with two lines of fortifications, built by Christian slaves centuries ago. Indeed, when Warden climbed the hill of which it formed the pinnacle, he realized that it was a landmark shown on a chart he had examined the previous evening. Square and strong, built to defy destruction, and rearing its one hundred and fifty feet of exquisitely fretted stonework from a tangled undergrowth of stunted vegetation, it seemed, in some proud and curiously subtle way, to promise the fulfilment of Domenico Garcia's bequest.

Great marble columns, many erect, but the majority overthrown, indicated the quadrangle of what was meant to be a gigantic mosque. Warden passed quickly through these and other ruins; he caught a hint of an aqueduct, looked into a deep excavation evidently designed as a cistern, and then, with somewhat more rapid pulse-beat, and a certain awed wonderment dominating his mind, made straight for the causeway that led to the "door three cubits from the ground."

To his chagrin, though the inclined plane itself might be ridden by a man on horseback, the arched door was solidly built up.

Here was an unforeseen check. It was one thing to be conscious of a cooling of the ardor that vowed the adornment of Evelyn's fair hand with a "gem of great price," but it was none the less baffling and exasperating to be at the foot of the tower and meet an apparently insuperable obstacle of this nature. Was he brought to Rabat by the most extraordinary series of events that could well have befallen him, only to find blind fate smiling maliciously? The thought was not to be borne. Somehow, anyhow, that tower must be entered, or the spirit of the hapless Garcia would haunt him for ever.

He looked around, thinking his Arabic would serve him in good stead were there a goat-herder or other tender of flocks near at hand. But he was quite alone on the tiny plateau. A couple of great storks which had built their nest on top of the tower looked down at him with wise eyes. Hundreds of pigeons fluttered about the summit or clung to the ridges of fretted stone, while the only window visible above the doorway was a hundred feet from the base.

But a soldier knows that every position, however impregnable in front, may be turned from the flanks. Before formulating any method of attack, he decided to survey the stronghold from all points of view, and, because Garcia mentioned the "third window on the left," he went to the left. On that side there were only

two windows, each twenty feet or more above his head, and Warden was nearly six feet in height. Then he reflected that the Portuguese, writing his sorrowful legend "to pleasure that loathly barbarian, M'Wanga, King of Benin," would surely count from the inside of the tower.

On he went, noting each cranny and fissure in the weather-beaten mass, until he reached the opposite side. Here were three windows, and, most gratifying of discoveries, he saw that the Arabs had contrived a means of entry and egress through the center window by scooping away the mortar between the huge blocks of granite used for the foundation story. Débris had accumulated close to the wall in such quantity that the window-sill was not more than fourteen feet from his eyes. To an active, barefooted Moor, with toes and fingers like the talons of a vulture, the climb would present no difficulty whatever. To a man whose nails were well kept, and whose toes would speedily be lacerated if not protected by boots, the scaling of the rough wall was no child's play. But Warden began to crawl upwards without a moment's hesitation.

He knew that the ascent would be easy compared with the return, while a fall meant the risk of a bad sprain, so he memorized each suitable foothold as he mounted, and often paused to make sure of the deepest niches. It must be confessed that no thought of other danger entered into his calculations. His military training should have made him more wary, but what had either experience or text-book to do with this

quest of a jewel, hidden for safety in a Moorish tomb so many years ago?

And he was armed, too, quite sufficiently to account for any prowling thieves who might be tempted to attack a stranger. A service revolver reposed in one pocket, and the chisel in another — but there did not seem to be the remotest probability of human interference; he had not seen a living thing save the birds since he breasted the hill.

When his hands rested on the broken stonework of the window he was naturally elated. Soon his eyes drew level with it, and he could peer into the interior. It was all one great apartment, not lofty, though an arched roof gave an impression of height. A staircase led to the upper stories, but it was broken. Desolation reigned supreme. Some startled pigeons flew out with loud clutter of wings at the sight of him. Then he raised himself steadily up, and leaped inside, while the walls echoed the noise of his spring with the hollow sound of sheer emptiness.

There was plenty of light, but, after a first hasty glance, he gave no further scrutiny to his surroundings. Were he spying out the land in an enemy's country, he would have looked at the littered floor to find traces of any recent visitor. Most certainly he would not have begun operations in Garcia's hiding-place without first visiting the upper rooms. But he was too eager and excited to be prudent. Evelyn seemed to be very near him at that moment. He remembered how her impetuous attempt to throw the calabash into the

Solent had led to the discovery of Garcia's amazing manuscript, and there was the spice of true romance in the fact that now, little more than two months later, he should actually be standing in "the tomb of the infidel buried outside the wall" of Rabat. His fingers itched to be at work. He was spurred by an intense curiosity. He felt that the finding of the ruby would lend credence to an otherwise unbelievable story. It connected Oku and the wild Benuë of two and a half centuries ago with Cowes and the Solent in Regatta Week. It made real the personality of a long-forgotten tyrant, who perchance lived again to-day in one of those three negroes he had seen in Figuero's company. No wonder, then, that Warden was impatient. Ten seconds after he had reached the interior of the building, he was bent over the "deep crack between the center stones" of the window described by Garcia.

There could be no doubting now which window the scribe meant. It stood next to that by which Warden had entered, and, sure enough, just in that place the stones were more than ordinarily wide apart. The word "crack" was ambiguous. It might be applied more accurately to a break in one particular stone, but Warden was no adept in the Portuguese tongue, and the dictionary-maker might be translating "interstice," or "crevice," or "division," when he wrote "crack." At any rate, the "center stones" were sound, but the mortar between them was partly eaten away, and Warden saw at once that in order to make good his search one of the stones must be prised out

bodily. A crowbar would have ended the job in a minute when once the chisel had cut a leverage, but, in the absence of a crowbar, he set to work with the chisel.

The mortar became flint-like when the deodorizing influence of the weather ceased to make itself felt. Nevertheless, the amateur house-breaker labored manfully. Half an hour's persistent chipping and twisting of the tool was rewarded by a sullen loosening of the stone.

Then he lifted it out of its bed, and there, nestling between it and its fellow, hidden beneath a layer of dust and feathers, lay a ring!

Now, Domenico Garcia spoke of a "ruby," not of a ring, but it needed no skilled eye to detect the cause of that seeming discrepancy. The ring was a crude affair, made of gold, it is true, but fashioned with rough strength merely to provide a safe means of carrying the great, dark stone held in its claws. Garcia did not waste words. To him the ring was naught, so why mention it?

The gold was discolored, of course, and the ruby did not reveal its red splendor until Warden had cleansed it with his handkerchief and breathed on it repeatedly to soften the dirt deposited on its bright facets by thousands of rainstorms. Then it was born again before his eyes. With a thrill of pity rather than gratification he gazed on its new and glowing life. "Friend, I am many marches from Rabat but few from death!" said the man who placed it there, thinking

that perchance he "might escape." Now his very bones were as the dust which had shrouded it during all those years, yet the wondrous fire in its heart shone forth as though it had left the lapidary's bench but yesterday. Warden even smiled sadly when he realized that, no matter how his wooing fared, such a huge gem could never shine on Evelyn Dane's slim finger. It was large enough to form the centerpiece of some stately necklace or tiara. He knew little about the value of precious stones, but this ruby was the size of a large marble. He had once seen a diamond that weighed twenty-four carats, and the ruby was much the larger of the two. He fancied he had read somewhere that a flawless ruby was of considerably higher intrinsic worth than a diamond of the same dimensions. The diamond he had in mind was priced at three thousand pounds. If, then, this ruby were flawless, its appearance in England would create something of a sensation.

And Garcia's story was true — that was the most astounding part of the business. The magnificent jewel winked and blinked in the sunlight. It might almost be alive, and telling him in plain language that the gods do not lead men into strange paths without just cause.

Suddenly he caught a blood-red flash that reminded him of the uncanny gleam in the eyes of the face on the gourd. The thought was disquieting, but he laughed.

"I am becoming a mere bundle of nerves," he said

aloud. "The sooner I get soaked with quinine the fitter I shall be. It must be the malaria in my system that makes me see things. Really, the proper thing to do now is to give that beastly mask to the head ju-ju man at Oku. Then it will be off my hands, and he will own the boss fetish of the whole West Coast."

He was about to pocket the ring when the question of its subsequent disposal occurred to him. It was such a remarkable object that any one who saw it could not fail to question him as to its history. Under existing circumstances, he did not court inquiry in that shape, and the queer notion came that, in all likelihood, its prior owner carried it slung round his neck.

"Yes, by Jove, and the cord strangled him," murmured Warden. Nevertheless, not being in the least superstitious, he might have adopted that plan of concealing it if he possessed a stout piece of cord or strong ribbon. But his pockets contained neither one nor the other, and a sharp pang came with the recollection that, in a case of similar need not so long ago, Evelyn's hussif held a neat coil of tape that would have suited his purpose exactly.

Inside his waistcoat, however, was a secret pocket for carrying paper money. It was provided with a flap and a button, and would serve admirably as a hiding-place until he was able to entrust the ruby to a bank for transference to London. So there it went, making a little lump over his heart, and reminding him constantly that Domenico Garcia had not deceived him.

He was about to climb down again when his glance

fell on the displaced stone. As a tribute to poor Garcia's memory, he put it back in its bed, and even took the trouble to pour a few handfuls of dust and loose mortar into the joints, so that none might know it had ever been removed. While thus occupied, his attention was momentarily drawn to a pair of storks circling lazily above the tower. He wondered if they were the same placid couple that had watched him earlier. No bird is more wide-awake than the stork, despite its habitual air of sleepy indifference, and Warden fancied that the noise he made must have disturbed the two sentinels on the top of the building.

The hill-side was absolutely deserted. Far below nestled the white mass of the town, its long, low, white-washed rectangles broken only by clumps of trees and an occasional dome or minaret. Near the quay lay the *Water Witch*. Her cranes were busy, two strings of coolies were rushing back and forth across a broad gangway, and the first mate was directing operations from the bridge. Warden smiled. He had heard the flow of language at the "Chief's" command when some incident on ship-board demanded the reading of the Riot Act, and he could well imagine the way in which those scampering Arabs were being incited to strenuous effort.

It was peaceful up here in the tower — so cool and remote from the noisy life of the port that he was tempted to linger. But if he would regain the shelter of some café in the town ere the sun became unbearably hot, he must be on the move. So, with a sigh for the

There was no mistaking the malice *Page* 183

unhappy Garcia's fate, and a farewell glance at the vaulted room which had witnessed that bygone tragedy, and perhaps many another, he began the descent. Thanks to the precautions taken during the climb, he found no great difficulty in placing his toes in the right niches. He was already below the level of the window, and was halting with both feet wedged into a broader crevice than usual while he changed his hand hold, when something, whether mere intuition or a slight sound, he never afterward knew, caused him to look straight up.

Leaning over the top of the ruin, and in a direct line above his head, was a Moor of fantastic appearance. A blue cotton garment of vivid hue seemed to have lent its dye to the man's face and hair. Had he been soused in a bath of indigo he could not have been colored more completely. Though this extraordinary apparition was fully one hundred and thirty feet above Warden's head, there was no mistaking the malice that gleamed from the dark eyes gazing down on the Nazarene. Under such conditions thought is quick, and Warden was sure that he had unwittingly invaded the sanctuary of a Mohammedan fanatic. He was minded to whip out the revolver and fire a shot that would at least scare this strange being back into his eyrie. But a British sense of fair play stopped him. The blue man, howsoever wild-looking, had not interfered with or molested him in any way. He himself was the intruder. The fact that he was undeniably startled did not justify the use of a bullet, even for scaring purposes.

The best thing to do was to reach the ground as speedily as might be, risking a jump when he was low enough to select a particular stone on which to alight. His dominant feeling at the moment was one of pique that he had failed to interpret correctly the flight of the storks. If the zealot on top of the tower meant mischief it would have been far better to have met him in one of the upper rooms than to be at his mercy while clinging like a fly to the face of the wall.

He was within ten feet of the pile of rough stones, and was about to drop on one larger than its fellows — in fact, he was already in the air, having sprung slightly outward, when a crushing blow on his head and left shoulder flung him violently on to the very slab of granite he was aiming for. The shock was so violent that he felt no pain. Consciousness was acute for a fraction of a second. He understood that a heavy stone had fallen or been dropped purposely from the summit of the tower, and that his change of position, helped perhaps by the arched crown of his pith hat, had prevented it from striking directly on top of his head. But that was all. He lay there, with his back propped awkwardly against the tower, staring up at the sky. He saw nothing but the bright dome of heaven. It seemed to be curiously near, and its glowing bounds were closing in on him with the speed of light. Then the veil fell, and there was merciful darkness.

Consternation reigned in Rabat next morning. The Captain of the *Water Witch* began the disturbance over

night, but when daylight brought no tidings of the missing Englishman, the British Vice-Consul talked most unfeelingly of a visit by the West Coast Squadron. A worried and anxious Bey, well aware that Morocco had troubles in plenty without Rabat adding to the store, protested that the Nazarene must have been spirited away without human agency. The Bey was not listened to, so he tried honestly to find out what had become of Warden. The only ascertainable facts were that the Giaour had bought a chisel, and was seen going to the tower of Hassan, the way to which was shown to him by one of his own countrymen. The hour was early, soon after sunrise. Since then he had seemingly vanished off the face of the earth. The Bey's myrmidons told how they had searched the Tower, and found that the Giaour had climbed into its interior. He had used the chisel and displaced a stone, apparently without object. But the place was now quite empty, though some one had ground corn and millet recently in an upper chamber.

Now, the Bey knew quite well that the Blue Man of El Hamra made the Tower his headquarters when he visited Rabat periodically to collect subscriptions for the Jehad that was to drive every foreigner out of the sacred land of the Moors. But he kept silent on that matter, for he feared the Blue Man even more than the British Fleet. Nevertheless, he caused inquiries to be made, though no one had met the tinted prophet of late.

In a country where there are no roads, nor any actual

government beyond the sphere of each chief town, official zeal does not travel far. The *Water Witch* sailed to Cape Coast Castle, and reported the disappearance of Mr. "Alfred Williams" to an officer who came out to meet her in the Governor's own surf-boat. A cruiser hastened to Rabat, and trained a gun on the principal palace, whereupon the Bey went aboard in person to explain that none could have made more genuine effort than he to find the lost Nazarene, either dead or alive. And perforce he was believed. Even the British Vice-Consul could not charge him with negligence, though not one word had he said to any European concerning the Blue Man of El Hamra.

The cruiser flitted back to Cape Coast Castle, and thence to Lagos, and there was much wonderment in the small circle that knew the truth. Yet no man is indispensable, whether in West Africa or London, and another Deputy Commissioner was gazetted for the special duty of dealing with native unrest in the Benuë River district. The facts were communicated to Whitehall, and an official from the Colonial Office called on an Under Secretary in the Foreign Office to explain why Captain Forbes was acting in the capacity for which Captain Arthur Warden seemed to be so peculiarly fitted.

"It is a queer business," said the Under Secretary. "What do you make of it?"

"I believe he was worried about a woman," began the other.

"What? In Rabat?"

"No, no, in London. Only this morning I received a letter from a Mrs. Laing, who says she is exceedingly anxious to ascertain Captain Warden's address. Now, Lady Hilbury wrote two days ago with the same object, and, of course, I returned a polite message to the effect that he was engaged on Government service."

"Mrs. Laing!" mused the Under Secretary. He unlocked a diary, and ran back through its pages. "I thought I remembered the name," he continued. "She was staying with the Baumgartners at Lochmerig before they went to Hamburg in their yacht."

He was silent for a few seconds. His nails seemed to need instant examination. Apparently satisfied by the scrutiny, he went on:

"I rather liked that youngster. He struck me as the sort of man who would go far. Have you replied to Mrs. Laing?"

"No."

"Then please ask her to come here next Tuesday about three o'clock. Just quote her letter, and allow it to be assumed that her inquiry concerning Captain Warden may be answered. I hope you don't mind my stepping in in a matter affecting your Department?"

The Colonial man laughed.

"My dear fellow," he said, "I have a whole regiment of lady visitors and correspondents whom I shall gladly hand over to you."

Thus it came to pass that Rosamund's furs and frills graced the same chair in the Foreign Office that Warden had sat in when he interviewed the Under Secretary.

She was charmingly anxious in manner. Though of high rank in the Government, the Under Secretary was young enough to be impressionable; he was clearly a dandy; such men are the easiest to subjugate.

"In the first place, Mrs. Laing," he said, when she explained her earnest wish to communicate at once with Captain Warden, "you will not misunderstand me if I ask what measure of urgency lies behind your business with him. We officials, you know, like to wrap ourselves in a cloak of mystery with red tape trimmings. Yet I promise you I shall match your candor if possible."

"Well — perhaps I ought to begin by saying that — if not exactly engaged — Captain Warden and I are very dear to each other. We were engaged once, years ago. But I was young. I was forced into marriage with another, who is now dead."

Rosamund made this ingenuous confession with the necessary hesitancy and downward eye-glances. The Under Secretary was sympathetic, and delighted, and envious of Captain Warden's good fortune. There could be no doubt about these things, because he said them.

"That being so, I know a good deal of his private affairs," said Rosamund demurely. "I knew, for instance, that he might be summoned to West Africa at any moment, but he is such a scrupulously precise man where duty is concerned that he would actually go away without telling me anything about it if ordered not to take any one into his confidence."

"Something of the kind has happened," admitted the Under Secretary.

"Ah, then, he really is in Africa, and if I write ——?"

"I am sorry, but I fear I have misled you. He is not in Nigeria. When last I heard of him he was at Rabat."

"Where is that?" she cried, genuinely surprised.

"On the West Coast of Morocco."

"But what is he doing there?"

The Under Secretary pressed the tips of his fingers closely together.

"It is difficult to say," he replied.

"Surely you will tell me. I have a right to know," she pleaded. "I understand the position on the Benuë River. I am the daughter of a West African Governor. I am one of the few women in England who can grasp the seriousness of any plot which brings together the men of Oku and the trusted confidant of a meddlesome foreign potentate. Captain Warden was sent to the Protectorate to carry out your instructions, and that is the very reason I wish to write to him. I have news of the utmost importance."

"Connected with the sailing of the *Sans Souci* from Hamburg?"

The question was so unexpected that Rosamund looked at the Under Secretary with more shrewdness than her fine eyes had displayed hitherto. He was making a little circle of dots with a pencil on a blotting-pad. Neither by voice nor manner did he display any surprise at her reference to the men of Oku.

"Yes, that is one of the items," she said.

"And the others?"

"But you are telling me nothing," she pouted.

"Forgive me. I hate the necessity that imposes restraint. Now, Mrs. Laing, enlighten me on one point, and I shall acquaint you with such few details of Captain Warden's recent movements as are in my possession. What interest had he in Rabat?"

"I — really — don't know."

The protest was honest. This fashionable lady was speaking the truth.

"Who, in your opinion, might know?" he persisted.

Rosamund was not prepared for that. Her mind flew instantly to Evelyn Dane. Of course she would not mention the girl's name; the mere thought of Evelyn cast a shadow over her mobile face.

"I haven't the faintest notion," she said.

The accompanying smile was forced, and the Under Secretary was not in the least deceived.

"Of course, if you cannot tell me why Captain Warden should go ashore at Rabat no one can, I suppose," and Rosamund caught the pleasing hint of her dominance in all that affected the man she loved.

"You keep on referring to this place that I have never before heard of," she cried. "Is he still at Rabat? I have ascertained that he is not at Lagos, or in Southern Nigeria, because I cabled for information."

"When last I heard of Captain Warden he was at Rabat," said the Under Secretary. "He is not there now. Indeed, I cannot tell you where he is. If the

earth had opened and swallowed him, he could not have disappeared more completely."

Rosamund gasped, and was somewhat inclined to storm, but not another syllable would the Under Secretary add to his amazing statement, though he undertook to communicate with her immediately when news of Warden's whereabouts reached him. In the meantime, she had to be content with knowledge that was no knowledge, and that only added to her perplexity. On the way to the hotel she stopped her carriage at a map-seller's and bought a map of Morocco, and a book which revealed many things about Rabat, but no one thing calculated to explain why Warden had gone there.

In some sense, the Under Secretary was more puzzled than Rosamund. He turned to his notes and pored over them. One paragraph stood out boldly.

"Captain Warden, when at Cowes, met a young lady, Miss Evelyn Dane, engaged as companion to Baumgartner's daughter. He took her in a dinghy to the *Sans Souci*, and this slight chance led to the discovery that the yacht was in charge of a shore watchman."

The Under Secretary actually rumpled his hair with those immaculate fingers of his.

"I am lost in a fog," he confessed ruefully. "Mrs. Laing is *not* engaged to Warden — Lady Hilbury herself told me so only this morning. Warden is the last man alive to discuss Government affairs with Mrs. Laing or any other woman. Why, then, does she

pretend that he did the very thing he did not do? And who is this girl, Evelyn Dane, to whom he telegraphed from Ostend and London before sailing in the *Water Witch?* Can *she* shed light on the dark places of Rabat? It is worth trying. The *Sans Souci* arrives at Madeira to-morrow. I shall instruct some one to call on Evelyn Dane, and find out how far she is mixed up in the wretched muddle. Confound Rabat, and the Benuë, and the men of Oku, and may Baumgartner be blistered! I shall not get a day's hunting before the frost sets in."

CHAPTER XI

THE BLUE MAN — AND A WHITE

When Warden came to his senses he found himself lying in impenetrable darkness. A half-formed belief that he was blind impelled him to put his hands to his face. Then he awoke to realities. His wrists were bound tightly, movement was painful and almost impossible, yet he seemed to be strapped to something that moved. By using his eyelids he soon succeeded in convincing himself that his eyes were uninjured, but the cold sweat of fear induced by that first horrible suspicion revived him more speedily than any stimulant. Straining his cramped limbs to test both his bonds and his injuries, he was not long in reaching a fairly accurate estimate of a disastrous plight. His head and left shoulder were stiff and sore, and he believed he had been rendered unconscious by a blow that caused a slight concussion of the brain. There was a bitter taste in his mouth which he recognized as poppy-juice, a preparation of opium widely used in Northern Africa as a soothing tonic. This, in itself, was somewhat reassuring. It suggested a crude effort to revive him. Again, though tied hand and foot, he was lying comfortably, and the irregular swaying motion which puzzled his waking thoughts was quickly

explained by the shuffling of sandals and the occasional grunting comments of the men who carried the palanquin, or litter, in which he was pent.

But how account for the darkness? Turn and twist as he would, there was no glimmer of light, and the most closely-woven fabric that ever left a loom could not altogether shut out the rays of the tropical sun rising over Morocco when last he saw its beams. Then a gust of cool air blew in on his clammy cheek through a slit in the litter-cloth, and the astounding knowledge that it was already night was forced on him. Now, he was almost certain that he suffered from no injury grave enough to entail fifteen or twenty hours of complete insensibility, and the only reasonable conclusion was that he had been drugged.

That was a displeasing explanation of the taste of poppy-juice, but he felt too sick and weary to care very much what strange hazard had brought him to his present state. It sufficed that he was a captive, that the *Water Witch* would sail without him, that he would be discredited in his service for missing an appointment of the utmost importance. These ills were obvious. No matter what other misfortunes the immediate future might have in store, his visit to Hassan's Tower had proved unlucky in all save its direct object, the recovery of the ruby.

Perhaps even that slight recompense for these positive evils had been taken from him. His revolver was gone, and the chisel, as he could determine by rolling a little from side to side. Probably his pockets were

emptied long since. He tried to raise his body ever so slightly, but failed, yet he fancied he could feel the pressure of the ring against his ribs. And in fact it was still in his possession, for those who had robbed him, though they unfastened his waistcoat to learn if he wore a money-belt, had missed the hidden pocket. He was deadly tired. The nauseating drug with which he had been dosed was still powerful enough to render him almost incapable of reasoned thought. After the effects of the first thrill of restored vitality had passed, he listened idly to the pattering feet and muttered talk of his bearers. Then he resigned himself to fate, and fell asleep.

When next he awoke he was still in the palanquin. But the curtains were drawn apart, it was daylight, and a Moor was unfastening his bonds. The man spoke to him in a jargon that was incomprehensible. Warden sat up. He felt cold and stiff, and a twinge of pain in his shoulder drew from him a stifled exclamation in English.

The Moor spoke again. This time it was dimly discernible that he was asking in execrable French if Monsieur wished to eat and drink.

Warden answered him in the same language.

"Why am I here?" he said, glancing round a rough camp pitched in the shade of a grove of tall trees.

"You must address the ever-to-be-honored Nila Moullah.[1] I am only a servant," was the reply.

[1] Pronounced "Neela Mool-la," and meaning literally, "Blue Priest."

"I am not French," began Warden, "I am an Englishman."

The man growled an oath in Arabic, and repeated the request about food. It was useless to question him.

"What is on the menu?" said Warden, with a wry smile.

He was not to be starved, it seemed. Perhaps some explanation of his present predicament would soon be forthcoming. At any rate, his wits would be clearer after a meal. He had eaten nothing during twenty-four hours at the lowest reckoning. He saw now that a new day was well advanced. The trees opposed a dense screen to the sun, but that luminary was high in the heavens, and he was sure he had not dreamed of the night journey in the palanquin. A dozen Moors, all armed to the teeth, lolled on the grass or sat on the gnarled roots of trees in the glade that sheltered the bivouac. At some little distance there was a palanquin similar to his own, save that its trappings were more gaudy, and the bearer-poles were painted a bright blue. The curtains were closed, but the color of the paint, added to the title of the moullah to whom the Moor referred him for information, accentuated a notion slowly taking shape in his brain. He had not forgotten the extraordinary being who gazed at him so threateningly from the top of the tower. It was a fair assumption that the man had dropped a stone on him at the very instant he took the downward leap that would have secured his safety. Was

he a prisoner in the hands of this fanatic? And for what purpose was he brought into the interior?

That he was far away from the coast was determined by many signs. The keen, invigorating mountain air, the hardy types of trees and shrubs, the absence of the myriads of insects that would have made a grove on the plains a place of anything but rest at that hour — these things were an open book to one accustomed to life in the jungle. He reflected bitterly that if he had practised the first rudiments of the scout's art the previous day, he would now, in all likelihood, be on board the steamer. Then he remembered the ring, and pressed a hand to his breast while ostensibly rubbing his injured shoulder. Yes, it was there — the one article left him. Watch, money, revolver, even a handkerchief and a box of matches, were stolen, but the ring remained. He wondered dully how the Blue Priest would have accounted for the piece of tattooed skin — with its Arabic-Latin quotation from the Epistle of St. Paul to the Hebrews and its Portuguese announcement of the secret hoard of Hassan's Tower — if it had happened to be in his pocket. But it reposed in a portmanteau in his cabin, together with the canvas bag containing the gourd. When he was missed, would the skipper examine his baggage to discover some clue to his identity? If so, that weather-beaten tar's remarks when he looked at the face of M'Wanga, one-time king of Benin, would be interesting.

The Moor came back with a dish of pillau, chicken

stewed with rice. It was exceedingly appetizing. Some coarse bread and a bowl of goat's milk completed a meal that was almost sumptuous. He ate heartily, and his spirits rose with each mouthful. The nondescript warriors who formed his escort paid little heed to him, even when he rose and stretched his limbs in a stroll round the palanquin. A man unacquainted with native ways might have drawn a favorable augury from their indifference — not so Warden, to whom it gave sure proof that his escape was deemed impossible.

At a little distance was a larger gathering, mainly servants and coolies. Here, too, were tethered some camels and hill ponies. The strength and equipment of the party betokened a much more serious purpose than the capture of a stray European; yet he seemed to be the only prisoner; the others were Moors, Arabs, and negroes, the soldiers and hangers-on of a fighting caravan.

A croaking voice from behind the curtains of the gaily caparisoned palanquin suddenly brought the armed Moors to their feet. One of them, who spoke good French, bade Warden come nearer, the litter-cloth was thrust aside, and the blue man of the Hassan Tower was revealed. Huddled up at the back of the cramped conveyance, he looked more like a strange beast than a man. If his appearance was forbidding when seen in Warden's upward glance from the base of the tower, it was positively repulsive at this nearer and more leisurely point of view. The dye applied

to skin and hair gave him a grotesque, almost maniacal aspect. His elfin locks were matted. His face and limbs had a peculiarly dead aspect, since the blue pigment had dried in dull scales that counterfeited the leathery surface of a mummy's body. The sunken black eyes, gleaming out of bloodshot sockets, alone told of life. He reminded Warden of some cannibal ju-ju man from the trackless swamps of Nigeria. That such a loathsome creature should command the fearful respect of several distinguished-looking Mohammedans would be inconceivable were it not for the hush that fell on them when they heard his voice, and the alacrity with which they obeyed his order to produce the Giaour.

Now, the singular fact that the two men who had spoken to him used the French language was not lost on Warden. It argued that they and their companions hailed from the Sahara border rather than the coast. If that were so, his capture was a fantastic mistake. They could have no possible grievance against him. A germ of hope sprang up in his heart, but the Nila Moullah soon destroyed it.

"Bid the Frank do homage," he grunted in Arabic.

"Kneel!" said the interpreter.

"I am rather stiff in the joints," said Warden, speaking composedly, "but I shall be glad to sit down and talk with the distinguished moullah if that is agreeable to him."

He squatted on the ground, but two men seized him roughly and tried to force him to his knees. He re-

sisted with a mad fury that was more creditable to his pluck than to his intelligence — yet there are indignities that cannot be borne, and this was one. Though handicapped by a crippled shoulder and the enervating effect of the drug, though he was grappled with before he could rise — and the Moors were men of bone and sinew — he fought so fiercely that both of his assailants were prostrate at the same time as himself. A coward's blow ended the unequal tussle. A heavy whip cut him ferociously across the eyes, and half-blinded him, and he was flung violently face downward in front of the Blue Man, who muttered:

"Let the Kaffir dog lie there till he learns obedience."

Thinking he was subdued, the Moors relaxed their grip. Then Warden sprang to his feet, If death were at hand, in dying he would at least rid tortured humanity of an oppressor. But the Nila Moullah seemed to guess his thought, and shrieked to his guards that they should hold fast the Nazarene. They pinioned his arms again, and the French-speaking Moor asked him why he had dared to disturb a place made holy by the presence of the moullah.

Nearly incoherent with pain and anger, Warden managed to answer that he had done harm to none, that he was not even a resident in Rabat, having landed at the port little more than an hour before he visited the Tower.

"Ah, he is not one of the accursed brood at Rabat? So much the better! They will fall like ripe pears at

the time of plucking," snarled the occupant of the litter.

Since the words were Arabic, Warden understood, but the instinct of self-preservation bade him conceal the fact. Nevertheless, he forced his lips to utter a dignified protest.

"I am an Englishman," he said, "and my disappearance will be reported. Inquiry will be made — it is known that I went to the Hassan Tower — and your large caravan cannot travel without exciting comment. You will certainly be pursued and attacked, whether I am living or dead. Yet I am not vindictive. Set me free, bring me back to Rabat in time to join my ship, and I shall lodge no complaint against you, nor claim my money and other belongings."

"What sayeth the unbeliever?" demanded the moullah.

He was told, with fair accuracy, and seemed to find humor in Warden's words.

"Slaves do not parley with their masters," he announced, grinning vindictively at his captive. "Tie him in the litter. If he speaks, gag him. To-morrow he can carry a load with the rest."

It needed all of Warden's philosophy to keep him from going mad during that dreadful journey across Morocco. The Nila Moullah's orders were literally obeyed. After the second day's march, when sixty miles of hilly country intervened between Rabat and the caravan, the Englishman was deprived of his palanquin and became a beast of burden. Still, he

lived, and was fed, and he prayed that he might retain his reason. The belief that he knew no Arabic enabled him to gather some scraps of information. The Blue Priest of El Hamra was preaching a new jehad, but, unlike others of his kidney, he was a born organizer. Instead of stirring up a minor rebellion which would be snuffed out either by the Sultan of Morocco or by one of the European powers, he was gradually making himself known throughout the length and breadth of the land. In his own stronghold of Lektawa, on the very confines of the Great Desert, he was building up an army of fanatics. Meanwhile, his repute was such that he levied heavy contributions in money and kind on the more fertile seaboard provinces. When the time was propitious he would descend on Morocco, enslave or kill every Christian, loot every port, and establish himself another Mahomet. Till then, he was content to pose as a saint.

Such a programme is nothing new in the Mussulman world. Since the inspired camel-driver of Mecca was rapt half-way to Paradise in his coffin, nearly five hundred mahdis have each and all claimed to be the one, true, and much-predicted "holy man" destined to lead Islam to complete victory over Christendom.

These impostors are infinitely worse than a pestilence. They resemble it in their unexpected outbursts and phenomenal areas of activity, but they scourge Moslemin mankind with a virulence unknown to

cholera or small-pox. It was Warden's grievous misfortune that he had blundered into Hassan's Tower while the Blue Man of El Hamra was meditating an attack on the purse of the faithful of Rabat, and the chance thus offered of securing a Christian captive to grace the prophet's return to Lektawa was too tempting to be neglected.

Fate oft chooses her victims with savage recklessness, but Warden felt, as he crossed the Atlas Mountains by way of the Beni Musa pass, that some influence more far-seeing than fate was leading him along the path trodden by Domenico Garcia after the ruby was hidden in the tower. He had no manner of doubt that the Portuguese artist and pirate was taken into the heart of Africa by this very route. The belief sustained him in those too frequent moments when sheer weariness of spirit whispered of self-destruction. He refused to end his sufferings in that way. If rabid fanaticism could sway a whole Mohammedan race, he, at least, placed his trust in a higher and holier creed. Not till grim death bade him lay down his arms would he abandon the struggle. Never a day passed that he did not plan a means of escape, but every scheme promised failure, and he did not mean to fail, for failure meant death. So he trudged on manfully, his only friend a stalwart negro who spoke the Hausa language, and ever the road led to the southeast — to the desert — to the great unknown land.

His boots gave out; his clothes were torn to rags; he was compelled to adopt the garments and many of the

habits of those with whom his lot was cast. But he kept the ruby safe, for none thought of searching him now, and he was given a certain measure of liberty once the Atlas range was passed. Towns and villages became more scattered. The country was so wild that any attempt to travel by other road than the long-established caravan track would mean easy re-capture. To go back was equally impossible. Every community in the Nila Moullah's own territory was gratified by the spectacle of a Giaour among the Mahdi's train. The people would crowd round him, and jeer at him, for no better cause than that he was one of the hated white race. Many of them had never before seen a white man, but that did not count — they cursed him roundly for the sake of the legends they had heard of the arrogance with which the Prophet's followers were treated by Nazarenes in their own lands.

Warden bore this contumely with infinite patience. He knew that the desert folk were repaying some of the wrongs their ancestors had endured from generations of Portuguese and Spanish freebooters. But at least he laid to heart the knowledge that he could never return by the way he had come unless he were still a slave. He would be recognized instantly, and clubbed to death like a mad dog.

Despite his hardships, he was soon restored to perfect health. The winter season, such as it is in the Sahara, was approaching. The air was invigorating, and the rough food, mainly grains and fruit, was whole-

some and nutritious. Yet, when Lektawa was reached, his case looked desperate indeed. Day followed day, and week followed week, without any prospect of relief, and he became more and more a mere appanage of the Nila Moullah's household. It was just when hope itself was yielding to numb despair that the sought-for opportunity presented itself. It came like a meteor falling from the midnight sky, and Warden, ever on the watch, was ready to avail himself of the light it shed on his dark calvary.

Some Mohammedan festival had led to a good deal of revelry and gormandizing when Warden, at the close of a tiring day, found his negro friend sitting at the door of his hut in an attitude of deep dejection.

"What has happened?" he asked.

The man, moved by the familiar accents of his native tongue, gave way to tears. His plaint was common enough in communities ruled by a truculent savage of the moullah's type. His daughter, a finely-built girl of fifteen, had been spoken of by some parasite, and she was summoned forthwith to the despot's seraglio. Now, the negro, who belonged to one of the numerous Hausa tribes, while ready enough to enlist under the prophet's banner, was far from gratified by the prospect of becoming his holiness' father-in-law. A doubtful privilege at the best, it was shared by many, and a goodly number had been beheaded to prevent further unpleasantness when the lady failed to recognize the moullah's attractiveness as a husband. Moreover, the Hausa girl herself rebelled against her

lot, and was nearly wild with terror at the thought of it. Warden could hear her sobbing inside the hut, while her father muttered his anger to one whom he knew instinctively he might trust.

Somehow, Warden felt that his chance had come. He dared all in the next instant.

"Were in I your place," he said, "that dog should never claim my daughter. I would kill him first."

The Hausa shivered with anxiety. What would be his fate if others were aware that he even listened to those bold words without denouncing the man who uttered them.

"You know him not, Seyyid," he said, and the fact that he used the word for "master" to a slave showed how deeply he was stirred. "He is invulnerable and far-seeing. He reads men's thoughts; he can kill with a look. Even you, a Nazarene, could not resist him."

"That is what he tells the fools who choose to believe him. I was made a prisoner because a stone struck me insensible. If he is so powerful, why did he hide me in a litter until he was far from Rabat? Now attend to me, Beni Kalli. I shall save you and your daughter if you do exactly as I bid you."

The man raised his eyes. Here was a new tone in the Christian who had endured insult and blows with meekness, except on that solitary occasion when the Blue Priest ordered him to kneel before him.

"Speak, Seyyid. At least I shall not betray you," he muttered.

"You must get me some Arab clothing which I can

put on in your hut when it is dark. Then I shall take your daughter to the moullah's house. At that hour he will be alone in an inner room, and the fact that I bring the girl will procure me admission ——"

"But you will be discovered at once. How should a man be an Arab who speaks no Arabic?"

"Do I not?" laughed Warden, going off instantly into the sonorous language of the desert. "I can accomplish that and more, Beni Kalli, if you follow my plan."

The Hausa sprang to his feet in amazement.

"Master!" he cried, "you know Arabic better than I, who have lived here many years."

He thought the Nazarene was a wizard. Thenceforth he was ready to fall in with any proposal he made.

Warden's scheme was feasible. Beni Kalli, afraid to be skeptical, yet only half convinced at first, quickly saw that its very daring commended it. Moreover, time pressed. He must either sacrifice his daughter or adopt some such heroic alternative as that suggested by one whom he already recognized as a leader of men. Immediate decision was called for. To defy the Nila Moullah's will meant simply that the malcontent would be beheaded forthwith.

"I am between the lion and his prey," said Beni Kalli valiantly. "So I face the lion. Have it as you will, Seyyid. I am at your command."

His proverb was well chosen. Never did people in dire straits adopt bolder strategy than that which

Warden had in mind. He had often weighed it and found it practicable, but hitherto it had proved impossible owing to the secrecy with which the prophet surrounded his daily life. When traveling, the Blue Man usually remained in his litter. At Lektawa he gave audience unseen. None could gain admission to his compound without stating their business and revealing their identity; he lived alone and hidden, like a spider in the dark recesses of his murderous web. Now that safeguard, previously unsurmountable, vanished by reason of the girl's presence. For the rest, Warden relied not only on his own audacity, but on the assured cowardliness of a crafty tyrant.

There is an hour in the desert — the hour following sunset — when night wraps the earth in blackness as in a pall. It is due to the rapid fall in temperature and the resultant condensation of surface moisture taken up by the air. But it soon passes. If there is a moon, the landscape becomes a radiant etching in black and silver; even when the moon is absent, the light of the stars makes traveling safe. Therefore, the time at Warden's disposal was limited. So many shrewd eyes watched the Nila Moullah's dwelling that if success were to attend the *coup* it must be carried out during the forty minutes of darkness.

And there was much to be done in that brief period. As soon as the rapidly advancing gloom permitted, Warden and the girl crossed the open space in the center of which stood the moullah's abode. The Englishman was so bronzed by exposure to the ele-

ments that the hood of a burnous was scarcely needed to conceal his face. The young negress, a comely statue of ebony draped in white cotton, was so terror-stricken that she offered the most serious obstacle to Warden's project. But that could not be helped. He depended on her to draw those ferret eyes off himself for the one precious moment he needed. After that, he trusted utterly to his own resources.

There was no trouble at the entrance to the compound. The guards were Moors recruited from the seaboard provinces, well-paid hirelings whom the Blue Man could safely order to kill any obnoxious members of his own tribe. Were they Arabs, they might have suspected Warden's accent, but the patois they used was almost unintelligible among the desert folk. So Warden spoke with a harsh distinctness.

"Go, one of you," he said, "and tell the glorious successor of the Prophet that the daughter of Beni Kalli awaits his pleasure."

The chief man among the guards came forward and peered at them. His glance fell on the shrinking form by the side of this stalwart Bedâwi.

"'Tis well," he said. "Even now the Holy One asked why she tarried. Who art thou, brother?"

"What, then, must the renowned son of Mahmoud suffer further delay?" cried Warden, even more loudly.

He risked a good deal, because some true Arab might be within earshot, and there are gutturals in the nomadic language of Northern Africa that no European throat can reproduce.

But his fearlessness was justified. A snarling voice reached them where they stood.

"Bring the girl hither," it growled, and the two were allowed to pass instantly.

Warden's heart throbbed a little faster as he half dragged the cowering negress across the courtyard. She knew what was going to happen, and had been coached as to her behavior, but she was only a child, and her fear was great for her father and herself. She could not believe that this gaunt Christian, the man whom she had seen working daily among the Nila Moullah's slaves, could really accomplish the task he had undertaken. So she whimpered with fright, and would have run back shrieking if Warden had not caught her arm and whispered a few words of encouragement.

The prophet's habit of concealing himself as much as possible from his adherents was now more helpful than a hundred armed men. He was supposed to pass day and night in meditation. None had ever seen him eat or sleep. To carry out this pose he seldom appeared from behind the thick mats which veiled the front of the room he occupied.

A lamp was burning within. When Warden lifted a corner of one of the mats, he saw a grotesque and ghoulish-looking figure seated cross-legged on a praying-carpet. Two red-rimmed, glittering black eyes gazed fixedly at him, and a hand sought under a cushion for a weapon, since none dared to pass that screen without direct instructions. Warden turned quickly, and pushed the girl forward.

"Beni Kalli was slow in fulfilling your wishes, O worthy of honor," he exclaimed, bowing low yet advancing the while, and never relaxing his grip on the unhappy negress. Her manifest reluctance explained his action. The Blue Man appreciated the rough ways of an Arab.

"There are means to make him speedy," he chuckled, rising.

That was what Warden wanted. In raising himself, the moullah was momentarily off his guard. In the next instant he was lying with his face on the floor; a strong hand was across his mouth pulling his head back until his neck was almost dislocated, while the blade of a sharp knife rested most suggestively across his throat.

"Turn the lamp low," said Warden to the girl. His voice was quiet and reassuring, but she was so completely unnerved that she nearly put out the light, which would have been awkward. Happily, she avoided that blunder.

"Now listen, you dog!" muttered Warden, slightly relieving the tension on the Blue Man's spinal column. "Do as I bid, and I shall spare your life. Say but a word, utter the least cry, save as I direct, and your head will leave your miserable body. Do you understand, *sug?*"

He used the concluding epithet purposely. It is more opprobrious in Arabic than its English equivalent "cur." It showed how fully he was the victor in this unexpected strife, and he emphasized the warning

with a more decided pressure of the sharp blade in the region of the jugular vein. The moullah could not have been more at his mercy were he manacled. He was flat on the ground, sprawling with arms and legs like some ugly frog, and Warden's right knee was jammed in the small of his back. There was naught to be done but yield, and, when permitted to speak, he murmured humbly that he would obey.

"Say 'Seyyid,' you swine!" said the Englishman.

"Seyyid!" gurgled the other.

"Pay heed, then," continued Warden, with a grim earnestness that left no doubt in his hearer's mind that he would not hesitate to slit a throat if need be. "The least alteration of my commands shall forfeit thy life. Call the leader of the guard, and tell him to summon hither Beni Kalli, who is to be admitted alone and without question. Tell him also to bring into the compound the three best camels you possess, with store of food and water for a journey. Beni Kalli is to come at once, and the camels are to be ready within ten minutes. Shout now — he will hear thee."

Thus far, the conditions did not sound onerous, and the Blue Man complied with them to the fraction of a syllable. An anxious, heart-searching five minutes followed. Warden did not fail to impress on the quaking wretch in his grasp that he was receiving more clemency than he deserved, and warned him sternly against ever again treating a European with contumely. He could feel the thrill of mortal terror that shook the moullah when he learnt the identity of his assailant.

He could feel the thrill of terror that shook the moullah

Page 212

It was good that the tyrant should know what fear was, yet the time passed with leaden feet until Beni Kalli, more than doubting that the Seyyid's scheme had failed, lifted a mat and thrust an awestricken countenance within. The girl uttered a cry of relief at the sight of her father, but Warden silenced her with a word.

He nodded to the Hausa, who immediately began to tie the moullah's legs and arms with leather thongs, using the wholly baffling slave-knot, which must be cut ere its victim can be freed. Soon the whining plaint of camels roused from their accustomed sleeping-place was audible. The animals were led into the court-yard, and their attendants received the dreaded moullah's exceedingly curt order that they were to be handed over to Beni Kalli, his daughter, and the Arab, Abdul ben Izzuf, for a journey which they were taking on his business.

And that was the last word the Blue Man of El Hamra ever uttered. Warden, it is true, kept his promise, and left him gagged and bound, unable to move or utter a cry, but otherwise uninjured. He lay there all night and all the following day, and his views concerning Nazarenes must have been most unedifying. After sunset it occurred to some one that even a prophet might fall ill. One who was in some sense his confidant and disciple volunteered to look behind the screen, when he could obtain no answer to his repeated requests for an audience. He was greatly shocked at seeing his revered teacher's plight. In fact, he thought

the moullah was dead. Most amazing thing of all, the famous blue robe had vanished. Its disappearance suggested that the time was ripe for the advent of a new prophet, and he proclaimed loudly that the Nila Moullah had been slain in a combat with the devil. To make sure, being of decisive habit, he planted a dagger firmly between the Blue Man's shoulder-blades. Although the corpse was warm when the guards came running at his outcry, none dared touch the body of one who had wrestled with Satan. It was evident at least that the disciple could not have trussed his spiritual guide so thoroughly in a few seconds, and the theory of diabolic agency was confirmed thereby.

Affairs became lively in Lektawa for a week or two. Several would-be prophets died suddenly before order was restored and a new régime was firmly established. It was no man's affair to discover what had become of the Nazarene slave or Beni Kalli and his daughter, so no effort was put forth toward that end. Had the fugitives known the outcome of their bold deed they might have spared themselves much anxiety. But that could not be. They fled along the caravan route that crosses the Western Sahara, and looked ever for the dust of a pursuing kafila. The Blue Man of El Hamra was in their thoughts, waking or dreaming, and many a league separated them from Lektawa ere their fear abated and they gave heed to the troubles that lay in front rather than to the vengeance that might be rushing on them from the rear.

CHAPTER XII

EVELYN HAS UNEXPECTED VISITORS

On a moonlit night in January, Evelyn Dane was sitting in the veranda of the big English-looking hotel which has brought more than a hint of Brighton to the sea front of Las Palmas, Gran Canaria. A dance was in progress within, and the jingle of a polka mixed curiously with the continuous roar of a heavy surf. But Evelyn was in no mood for dancing. While she was dressing for dinner that evening the boom of a gun from the harbor announced the arrival of a foreign warship. Soon afterward she learned the ship's name, and from that moment she was on the tip-toe of expectation, for the captain of H. M. second-class cruiser *Valiant* supplied the one remaining link between her present embittered life and the rose-colored romance of a day at Plymouth.

Two months earlier, Captain Mortimer came to her in Funchal, Madeira, with a message that thrilled her with hope. The Foreign Office had requested him, he said, to forward any information she could give which might help to explain why Captain Warden should vanish so mysteriously at Rabat.

The inquiry was a private one. She must mention

it to none, but it was deemed so important by the authorities in Whitehall that the *Valiant* was sent specially to Madeira to make it. There was not much that she could tell him. Her sole knowledge of Rabat was gleaned from Domenico Garcia's message. She remembered the text with sufficient accuracy — but what a queer jumble of fact and fable it sounded! Even she herself, though she had actually seen the carved gourd bobbing about in the Solent, fancied now that the tattooed parchment supplied a far-fetched excuse for Warden's disappearance.

Nevertheless, the sailor's words had driven some of the hardness out of her heart. She was beginning to think that Mrs. Laing's story was true — that Warden was really her rival's promised husband — that he had not dared even to write again when he knew that Rosamund was at Lockmerig. But when this courtly officer assured her that Captain Warden had undoubtedly sailed for West Africa two days after the *Sans Souci* quitted the lock, she realized that, in some respects, her doubts were unwarranted. It was amazing that her lover had not announced his departure, but the ways of Governments are strange, and his fall from grace was by no means so great as she had been forced to believe. And then her tiny bit of blue sky was darkened by a new cloud. Although the captain of the *Valiant*, out of sheer kindliness, concealed the sinister outcome of Warden's visit to the Morocco town, his very reticence induced anxiety. He was greatly interested in Garcia's allusion to Hassan's

Tower, listened carefully to Evelyn's story of the gourd, and, before departing, asked her to let him know at Lagos if she left Madeira. That was all. She had been eight weeks in Las Palmas without ever a word of her lover. The gloom in her soul deepened ever, until the clamor of the cruiser's salute awoke the echoes.

Hence, Evelyn was one of the few people in the capital city of the Canary Islands who could supply a reason for the presence of the *Valiant* other than the need of fresh supplies of a vessel on the West African station. Nor was she wrong in the assumption that Captain Mortimer might call on her without delay. She had been seated not many minutes in the veranda, and had successfully held at bay only two of the half-dozen Spanish officers who wished to dance with her, when the sailor himself approached, and lifted his cap with a pleasant smile.

"You remember me, Miss Dane?" he began.

"Yes. I knew the *Valiant* had arrived, and I felt so sure you would look me up that I have refused all invitations to the ballroom."

An expression of surprise flitted across the man's frank face. Evidently, he had placed Evelyn in another and higher category than the flippant young ladies who dominate the winter society of Madeira and Gran Canaria. To his thinking, when last he interviewed her, Warden, the man to whom she was engaged, was undoubtedly dead. By this time, even a heedless girl might have suspected the truth, and he

was not prepared to find Warden's sweetheart so obviously indifferent to his fate as to plunge into all the gaiety of the Las Palmas season.

He knew nothing of the agony of suspense, the poison of doubt, the self-humiliation and passionate despair of those dreary weeks, nor did he appreciate her position in the Baumgartner household. But he was hurt, and his manner proved it. Men who are called on at times to face death in their country's service like to believe that their women-folk are eager for news of them. So Mortimer was disappointed in Evelyn.

"I fear I shall be regarded as an intruder by some of the young gentlemen I see pirouetting inside," he said. "But I shall not detain you long. I promised to let you know if any further news was forthcoming as to Captain Warden's whereabouts. When we met at Funchal I feared the worst. Now I have good reason to believe he is alive."

She leaped to her feet. Her cheeks blanched, but those blue eyes of hers blazed with sudden fire.

"You have heard of him? You know where he is?" she gasped, all a-quiver with excitement.

The sailor was mystified. Nevertheless, her manifest interest almost brought back the sympathetic note to his voice — almost, but not quite, and she was aware of the altered tone.

"You are asking too much," he said with a little laugh. "Africa does not yield her secrets so readily, I assure you. Still, I have a rather complicated yarn

for you. Shall we sit here, or would you care for a stroll in the garden? I take it we are less likely to be disturbed there."

Now it was Evelyn's turn to be puzzled.

It was no disloyalty to the memory of one who once had been her lover, but the absolute necessity of chaperoning Beryl Baumgartner during her mother's indisposition that made dancing a possibility that night.

"The garden by all means," she agreed, trying hard to restrain her agitation. So they walked among the dusty palms and oleanders, and Captain Mortimer told her something of the strange doings of the Blue Man of El Hamra.

When the *Valiant* paid her second visit to Rabat, the Bey was inclined to be communicative. As a matter of fact, the news of the Nila Moullah's disastrous fight with the Evil One spread so rapidly that it reached the seaboard within a fortnight, whereas the prophet's journey in the reverse direction took three weeks. Other items filtered through the Atlas passes, and finally there came a man who was actually in Lektawa at the time of the dread combat. He it was who first gave definite assurance that Warden lived. When the new ruler of that disturbed city had slain every individual overtly opposed to him, and the remaining inhabitants were meditating on the divine right of kings, it occurred to someone that the Nazarene and Beni Kalli were missing. A caravan from Bel Abbas reported that a European in Arab clothing, accompanied by a Hausa soldier and a negress, had

ridden in there from the north, and was recruiting a kafila to go on to Taudeni and Timbuktu. The Frank had plenty of gold-dust in quills, both he and the Hausa were well armed, he spoke Arabic like a native, and claimed to be the special protégé of the Blue Man of El Hamra, who had carried benevolence to the point of giving him his own particular wrap of blue cotton, which was exhibited to the faithful, not so much for worship, but as a guarantee of good faith.

It was noticed, too, that the knife used by Satan in destroying the Nila Moullah resembled one that was wont to hang at the girdle of his successor, so the deduction was reasonable, provided the deducer were sufficiently far away from Lektawa, that the flight of the Christian and his accomplices had something in common with the moullah's death and the establishment of the new régime.

This, and more, the Bey of Rabat discreetly told to the captain of the warship. It was clear enough, in some senses, but it left Evelyn greatly bewildered.

"These names of people and places are so much Greek to me," she cried. "What is the outcome of it all? Is Captain Warden marching across Africa?"

Mortimer was prepared for that question. He unfolded a map, and they pored over it together. Small as the type was in which many of the towns were shown, the bright moonlight would have permitted the names to be read. But that was unnecessary. The sailor knew exactly where to point while he explained matters.

"Here is Rabat," he said, "and here, beyond the mountain chain, Lektawa. Now, there appears to be little doubt that Captain Warden was the European encountered at Bel Abbas, and I am inclined to believe the north-bound caravan's account of his proceedings there. A long way south, at the very verge of a tremendous stretch of desert, we come to Timbuktu. The obvious inference is that he adopted the Sahara route as safer than the journey across Morocco, and headed that way in order to reach Nigeria, the place where his duty lies."

"Can he do it? Dare I even hope that he will pass unharmed through thousands of miles of wild country inhabited only by savages?"

Her voice broke, and the sailor saw that her eyes were filled with tears. More perplexed than ever, he tried to dispel her foreboding, though none knew better than he the perils Warden would have to encounter.

"Steady, Miss Dane," he said cheerily. "He jumped the worst fence when he got away from Lektawa with money and supplies. The fact that he made Bel Abbas vouches for his ability to take the rest of the trip, and he will be on the Niger River long before he reaches the thousand-mile limit. Once there, he is practically in British territory. To put it plainly, two months ago I didn't think his chance of being alive amounted to a row of beans, whereas to-day I am confident he will pull through."

"So you did not tell me everything at Funchal? Are you keeping back the less pleasing facts now?"

"No. On my honor, I have given you the whole budget."

"When will it be known whether or not — he has — arrived in Nigeria?"

"Ah, that depends on so many circumstances. It is six hundred miles from Bel Abbas to the Niger, and — there may be difficulties. May I ask you a personal question, Miss Dane? Are you Captain Warden's fiancée?"

"I — I thought so," sobbed Evelyn.

"You thought so? Didn't you know?"

There was a moment of tense silence. Then Evelyn swept the tears from her eyes with a splendid confidence. The moonbeams spread a silvery riband across the dark Atlantic toward the horizon. Beyond that magic path lay Africa, and her heart had bridged the void ere she answered.

"Yes," she said proudly. "I know! Never again shall doubt find room in my mind. Oh, Captain Mortimer, if only I might tell you what I have suffered during these horrible months, when never a word came from him, and another woman lost no opportunity of taunting me with the lie that she was his promised wife!"

"You are speaking of Mrs. Laing, I suppose?"

For an instant Evelyn did not appreciate the significance of that marvelously accurate guess. Then she turned and looked at him in wonderment.

"Why do you mention her?" she cried, almost hysterically.

The sailor smiled, though his face showed some degree of confusion.

"I have done it now, so I may as well make a clean breast of it. But, mind you, I am revealing official secrets, so please forget what I am telling you. Mrs. Laing went to the Foreign Office, and claimed to be engaged to Warden. For some reason — perhaps some one there had seen *you* — she was not believed, and that is why I was sent to you at Funchal. At any rate, they seem to know all about you in Whitehall."

"But only yesterday Mrs. Laing pretended that Arthur — that Captain Warden had written to her, saying he was engaged on a secret mission for the Government."

"You can take it from me he did nothing of the sort. Outside the department, no one knew where he had gone or what he was doing. He even passed under an alias on board the *Water Witch.* There — I didn't mean to tell you that. I am but a poor diplomatist, I fear. And that reminds me: I must hark back to my errand. Why has Mrs. Laing come here?"

Evelyn lifted her head defiantly. Mortimer had blundered into the worst possible line of inquiry.

"She has told me repeatedly that she is in Las Palmas in order to meet Captain Warden when he returns from the Oku territory."

The man glanced around to be sure they were not overheard.

"That, at least, is untrue, because he is not there. Owing to his absence, another deputy commissioner

is appointed. I expect Mrs. Laing's talkativeness does not extend to her relations with Miguel Figuero?"

"Ah, how I loathe that man! He — pestered me with his attentions at Hamburg, and Trouville, and Arcachon, and Biarritz. He was either on board the yacht or visited us at each port of call. But it is only fair to admit," she added, "that he seemed rather to avoid Mrs. Laing."

"I have reason to believe that they are acting in collusion," said Mortimer dryly. "How long do you remain on the island, Miss Dane?"

"There was some talk the other day of our return."

"What, all of you?"

"Yes. Mrs. Baumgartner wishes to pass the spring in the Riviera, and her husband says he has important business at Frankfort in February, so he will leave us at Nice while he attends to it."

"Do you go in the yacht?"

"I suppose so. She is there — in the harbor."

"Yes. The *Sans Souci* does not travel far without my knowledge. You changed your crew at Hamburg, I believe?"

"Yes, all our Englishmen were sent home. Mr. Baumgartner said that Germans were cheaper and more obedient."

"What was your opinion of the new crew?"

"I didn't like them at first, as I had to bother my wits in talking German if I wished to speak to any of them, but they are a very superior set of men."

"You carry a good many hands for a small vessel?"

"Well, yes. Even I thought that."

"Did you ship a large quantity of heavy stores at Hamburg?"

"I don't know. We were in a hotel there five or six days, and never visited the yacht during that time."

"Of course, Miss Dane, if you should be asked why I called, we are old friends, eh? I hope I may claim that privilege apart from other considerations?"

"You have been most kind, Captain Mortimer. I cannot tell you what a load of care you have taken from me. Now, I must go to the ballroom and see that none of those romantic Spaniards has run off with my charge."

"Who is that?" he inquired.

"Beryl Baumgartner. I am her companion, you know. Though I am only three years older than Beryl, I am credited with so much more gravity that her mother trusts her to me absolutely."

"Is Mrs. Laing there?"

"She was dancing with the Commandante when I came out."

He laughed.

"I shall probably see you again to-morrow evening," he said. "Some of my officers will be ashore, and I may be dining here."

He took his leave with a cordiality that was in marked contrast to his earlier frigid manner, but Evelyn had long since forgotten her surprise at his momentary curtness.

The extraordinary tidings of Warden's adventures in Morocco absorbed her mind to the exclusion of all else. She wanted to study a map, to follow his wanderings in spirit, to weave fantasies about his track across the desert with all the ardor of reawakened love. How could she ever have doubted him? She was brave enough to flout Rosamund Laing's first attempt to undermine her trust — why had she yielded to the strain during these later days of weary waiting? She was sure it was not so with her lover. Some time, quite soon, there would be a letter or a cablegram announcing his safe arrival at some weirdly named British station in Northern Nigeria. She must learn the map of West Africa by heart. Perhaps her friend, Captain Mortimer, might tell her from what town she might expect to receive the earliest news.

But Evelyn's humble light-heartedness was destined not to survive the next ten minutes. Looking in at the ballroom, she saw Beryl waltzing with a Canario fruit-grower, a youthful Spaniard of immense wealth who owned a large part of the island. While crossing the hall with intent to find the manager, and get the loan of an atlas, she almost ran into the arms of Lord Fairholme, who was standing there, talking to Mrs. Laing.

"By gad, Miss Dane, it's just like bein' in Lochmerig," he cried. "Here we are again, you know — the same old circus. Couldn't stand the British climate, so I fled here, per Spanish packet, as the Post Office says."

"I am delighted to see you again," she began, but Mrs. Laing broke in breathlessly.

"They've just finished that waltz, Lord Fairholme. Shall we make up a set for the Lancers?"

"Well — er — no," he said lamely. "You see, I'm not dancing just now."

Rosamund flushed with annoyance. Her rudeness to Evelyn had caused her to forget Fairholme's bereavement.

"Pray forgive me," she cried. "How thoughtless I was! Who was the man you were conversing with so deeply in the garden, Miss Dane?"

"A friend, an officer on board one of the ships in the harbor. Are you making a long stay in Las Palmas, Lord Fairholme?"

The good-natured little peer was conscious that the two women were at daggers drawn, and the younger one could evidently match her senior in contemptuous indifference.

"Dunno yet," he grinned. "It depends on how Mrs. Laing and you treat me. Judgin' by the giddy throng in the ballroom, I'm afraid I shall figure again in the 'also ran' class."

"Miss Dane is free. I can vouch for that," laughed Rosamund.

But Evelyn's answering smile was more genuine.

"Mrs. Laing's statements are invariably inaccurate where I am concerned," she said. "If your matrimonial choice rests between her and me, Lord Fairholme, it is only fair that I should tell you I have

promised to marry Captain Arthur Warden, of the Nigeria Protectorate, when next he returns to England."

"Captain Arthur Warden!" gasped the earl, who, despite his habitual air of buffoonery, could remember some things exceedingly well.

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"Er — not exactly. I've heard his name."

Rosamund, scarcely prepared for this turning of the tables, instantly recalled the unpleasant fact that Billy Thring was by her side in the hall at Lochmerig when she purloined Evelyn's letter. He looked at her now fixedly, as the color in her face rose and fell with telltale confusion. For once, she was unable to force a retort. She almost feared that Fairholme would blurt forth some reference to the letter.

"I was under a different impression," she managed to say. "But I am sure our private affairs are not of vital interest to Lord Fairholme."

"Where is old I. D. B.?" put in the man, anxious to restore harmony. "Shootin' wild duck by moonlight, eh, what?"

Evelyn resumed her quest of the manager. She had not failed to notice Rosamund Laing's unaccountable embarrassment, but she attributed it to their personal feud, and imagined that her rival was furiously annoyed by her outspokenness. It was fortunate, in some respects, that the incident was fresh in her mind. She was soon to be enlightened.

She borrowed an atlas, and was studying the omi-

nously vague details of the interior of Northwest Africa, when a maid-servant came to her room. With some difficulty, for Evelyn knew very little Spanish, the girl made her understand that *un muchado Ingles* wished to see her. An English boy! Who could it be at that hour? The few English children visiting the island were in bed long since, or ought to be, if they were not. Closing the atlas, she followed the *criada* down-stairs. In the doorway, trying to make out the English of a gigantic hall-porter, was a sturdy youth dressed in sailor fashion. She recognized him at the first glance, but some instinct warned her not to cry aloud her astonishment.

Hurrying forward, she caught him by the arm.

"Chris!" she whispered, "is it really you?"

His chubby face creased with joy at the sight of her.

"Yes, miss, it's me right enough," he said. "Can you come with me to father? He's orfly anxious ter see yer, miss."

"Where is he?"

"Out there in the road, miss, standin' orf an' on till I heave in sight. He wouldn't show up at the hotel, miss, 'cause 'is wooden leg sort o' makes folk stare at 'im, an' he don't want too many people ter know 'e kem 'ere to find you."

"Came to find me — all the way from England? Who sent him?"

They were in the roadway now, and walking fast in the direction of the alameda, or public gardens, where

a military band plays each evening for the inhabitants of Las Palmas.

"Bless yer 'eart, miss, we've done a lot more'n come from England," said Chris. "We've followed yer to Scotland, an' Germany, an' France, an' Madeira. But father'll tell you all about it. My eye, wasn't' e pleased w'en our steamer rounded the mole an' 'e sighted the *San Sowsy*. 'Lord love a duck, Chris,' sez 'e, 'there she is at last. Oo'll say now that Peter Evans 'asn't done as he was tole'!"

Evelyn, in her excitement, still held the boy's arm. He felt that she was trembling, though her voice was calm.

"Chris," she repeated, "who sent you?"

"Cap'n Warden, miss. But there! It's dad's yarn. You must 'ave it from 'im, from chapter one to finis."

Though on the brink of tears — for she was overwrought — the girl could not help smiling.

"You are becoming quite literary," she said.

"That's the way I read a book if it's any good, miss, — a book like 'The Scalp Hunters' or 'Nick of the Woods' — every word, from beginnin' to end. There 'e is — that's father — on the seat under the tree. I s'pose 'e's tired. It was a long tramp through the dust from the quay."

Peter received her joyously.

"Sink me!" he cried, "but it's a cure for sore eyes ter see you at last, miss. It *is* you, isn't it?"

He was not content until he had looked her full in the face in the moonlight.

"You're a bit thinner," he commented. "People can say wot they like, but Ole England's hard to beat for fresh air an' sound vittals. Chris an' me would ha' starved on that tub of a mail-boat if we 'adn't palled in with the Scotch engineer, who med 'em cook some plain food. Hello! You're bin cryin'? Now, wot the ——"

"Peter," said Evelyn brokenly, "for Heaven's sake, if you have news of Captain Warden tell me what it is."

The ex-pilot produced a frayed and soiled parcel from a pocket.

"There you are, miss," he cried triumphantly. "I've done it! 'Find Miss Dane, no matter wot it costs' — them's my sailin' orders from the cap'n. 'Deliver this letter into Miss Dane's own 'ands.' Right again! — as per code! Now, miss, if I was you, I'd just open that there envelope an' see wot 'e sez. Then, mebbe, I can fill in a bit. I tole 'im I'd find you within a month, but I couldn't! Nobody could unless he was a bird, an' a jolly good flier at that. W'y, I've follered you pretty well round the compass. An' my godfather! — 'aven't you covered up yer tracks!"

The first thing Evelyn's trembling fingers withdrew from the package was the jeweler's case containing the ring. When the diamonds flashed in the moonlight she uttered a choking cry and her lips trembled pitifully. So this was Arthur Warden's answer to Rosamund Laing's jibes! Without hesitation, without

waiting to read a word of the many pages of manuscript that accompanied it, she slipped it on to the engagement finger of her left hand. It did not fit. It was far too large. But what did that matter? Its glories might await her scrutiny another time. Just then she wanted to assure herself that she had gone back to her allegiance before she was vouchsafed a syllable of explanation. It was humility, not pride, that governed her action.

Peter, however, did not regard the glittering ring with such self-effacement. His prominent eyes bulged with surprise, and he gripped his son's shoulder emphatically.

"Tell you wot, Chris," he whispered hoarsely, "If we'd ha' known wot was in that billy-doo we'd not ha' slep' so sound o' nights!"

"Not while we was in furrin parts, father."

"Not in any parts, me lad. Them sort o' sparks'll get you a knife under your ribs anywhere. Now, if I was Miss Dane, I'd turn it into money, quick. But she won't, mark my words. She'll just twiddle it round, an' shove in a hairpin w'en there's a chandelier handy, an' lean on 'er elbow w'en the light shines on the port bow — all to make the other wimmen green with envy."

Though Evelyn was deep in her letter — though her brows were knitted and her little hands clenched as the full measure of Rosamund's perfidy was revealed to her, she could not help overhearing Peter's stage aside. For a second her eyes were raised from the stupefying

record, and they blazed with a light that surpassed the fire in the diamonds.

"You are right, Peter," she cried, and her voice sounded shrilly in her own ears. "One woman, at least, shall see my ring, even though envy were to kill her."

CHAPTER XIII

EVELYN ENTERS THE FRAY

Only a woman can fathom another woman's mind. A man tries to think logically; a woman throws logic to the winds, and reads her opponent's tactics by intuition. Though Warden was not wholly devoid of suspicion of Rosamund's disinterestedness when he penned the plain statement which Evelyn now skimmed through by the light of the Las Palmas moon, he little dreamed that he was framing a damning indictment of one who claimed to be his friend. But Evelyn extracted from every line the hidden truth. A gentlewoman to her finger-tips, her loathing of Mrs. Laing's despicable tactics was so overpowering for a while that she could only vent her scorn and contempt by little gasps and sobs of indignation.

Her lover's account of events at Ostend and in London was transparently honest. She saw now that by some clever and unscrupulous device his letters and telegrams had been withheld. The burking of her own letters, sent with unfailing regularity until outraged pride bade her cease, was equally clear. But how had their common enemy achieved these results? Why did Mrs. Laing flush and look guilty when Lord Fairholme recognized Warden's name half an hour ago?

Well, she would ask the genial little nobleman for an explanation. He would be candid, she was sure; perhaps he might help to illumine some of the dark places of the last four months.

Peter Evans, watching her eyes as they devoured page after page, winked solemnly at Chris, but held his peace until the letter was restored to its envelope. Then he felt that his innings had come.

"Well, miss," he remarked quietly, "does that round off everything in ship-shape style?"

For answer, she put both hands on his shoulders, and looked into his weather-beaten face.

"Peter," she said, "I can never repay you for what you have done. Captain Warden tells me he had faith in you, and indeed you have justified his confidence. But how did you and Chris manage to travel all this long way to find me? What has it cost you? I have not much money at my command here ——"

"Money, miss? Did the Cap'n say nothink about it?"

"No."

"Just like 'im. There never *was* a more free-handed gent than 'im. Funny thing, ain't it, that the wrong people are bloomin' millionaires. I s'pose that's w'y they 'ave it — coss they stick to it. Lord love a duck, ther's bin no trouble about *money!* He did some tricks at the Casino ——"

"Yes, yes, he has told me that."

"Well, w'en 'e gives me that there packidge, 'e forks out fifty quid, an' says, 'Peter, if you want more,

go to my bank.' But fifty golden suvrins is a small fortin to a sailor-man — I've known the time it 'ud keep me an' my missus an' Chris for a year — an' I wasn't flingin' it about for bookin' clerks an' pursers to pick up, neether. We 'ad to dig a bit out o' the bank w'en this trip showed up, but afore that Chris an' me worked our passidge to Scotland, an' Hamburg, an' as far south as Bordeaux."

"You went to Scotland? Why?"

"Afore the Cap'n left Lunnon 'e 'ad a telegram from the coastguard to say the *San Sowsy* headed sou'east by east from Lochmerig, an' them ain't the sailin' directions for the Shetlands, or they wasn't w'en I was at sea. It seemed to me some old salt thereabouts might help a bit — fishermen keep a pretty close eye on passin' craft, miss — so off we goes. I shipped as extra hand on the *Inverkeld*, bound from London to Aberdeen, an' Chris was stooard in the engineers' mess. Sure enough, I lights on a Montrose herrin'-boat as 'ad seen the yacht bearin' away in the line for Hamburg, I follered, on a tramp from Newcastle, but I was a week late. You see, my orders was 'into her own 'ands, Peter.'"

"Oh, you are a dear!"

"Well, mebbe. I've bin called most things in me time, miss. But it's spinnin' a tremenjous long yarn to go over all the ground. Wot I want to ax you now is this — wot stopped Cap'n Warden from gettin' your letters?"

"Ah, Peter! a wicked woman, I am afraid."

"D'ye 'ear, Chris?" and Peter turned solemnly to his son. "Wot did I tell yer? You see, miss," he went on, "I looked in at the Lodge, an' med friends with a servant or two, an' it kem out that Mrs. Laing collared a telegram addressed to you. 'Was it himportant?' sez one chap. 'Reel himportant,' sez I, 'it was from 'er young man.' Beg pardon, miss, but that's the way we talks among ourselves. 'Oo is he?' sez the other fellow. 'Captain Warden,' sez I. 'Not Captain Arthur Warden, of Ostend?' sez 'e. 'The very man,' sez I. 'Dash my eyes,' sez 'e, 'that's queer. Mrs. Laing wanted a letter out of the box one day w'en I was goin' to the post, an' that's the very name as was on it. Wot's 'is little game? Is 'e a-playin' up to both of 'em?' 'Young man,' sez I, 'you don't know 'im. 'E's the straightest gentleman as ever wore shoe-leather.' I axed 'im w'en the incident occurred, as they say in the noospapers, an' 'e tole me it was just arter Mrs. Laing kem to Lochmerig. In fact, 'e wouldn't ha' known 'oo she was if she 'adn't bin standin' in the 'all talkin' to — to — wot's 'is name, Chris?"

"Lord Fairholme?" broke in Evelyn.

"No, miss, that wasn't it — not in the same street."

"Billy Thring?"

"Tally! I've got it all logged up in my cabin. I wasn't sartin I'd see you to-night, or I'd ha' brought the book. That's 'im — Billy Thring — it sounds familiar like, if he's a swell, but that's wot they called 'im at Lochmerig."

"Peter, you are a wonder. You have found out the one thing I wanted to know."

"Excuse me, miss, but you're a bit of a wonder yourself. If that was the on'y missin' link, w'y didn't you write to me, care o' the Pilots' Office, Cardiff? I could ha' put you straight within a week. Any ship's skipper would ha' guessed my address, if you tole 'im about the *Nancy* an' gev 'im my name."

"I fear I am very much to blame," said Evelyn contritely. "But you hardly realize yet how I have been victimized. Now I must go. It is very late. Where are you staying?"

"Chris an' me will turn in with our engineer friend on board the *Cid*. At least that's wot *I* call the old tub, but these Spanish jokers make it into *Thith*. Did y' ever 'ear anythink funnier'n that?"

She laughed blithely, arranged an early hour to meet the two at the mole next day, and sped back to the hotel. She wanted to read that thrice-precious letter again. Seen in the moonlight, it seemed to be fantastic, unreal. The words danced before her eyes. Her brain had only half grasped its extraordinary meanings.

In the privacy of her own room she should go through it slowly, weighing its bewildering revelations, taking to her very heart the outspoken, manly sentences that assured her of Warden's devotion, and planning with new zest the means whereby she might circumvent her enemies and his. Warden had been deceived even more grossly than she herself. His faithful record of

Peter, you are a wonder *Page* 238

Rosamund's malicious innuendoes during the dinner at the Savoy Hotel gave ample proof of that. It was quite true she had talked with Figuero in the garden at Lochmerig. The man naturally interested her; his manner of speech was quaint, and he told her strange things about the country in which the whole of her lover's active career might be passed. Was that a crime? And how shameful that any woman should write such a wicked untruth as to say that she had gossiped to Thring and others about the men of Oku! Of course, Mrs. Laing had obtained her information from the stolen letter. Evelyn remembered perfectly well the unfortunate postscript in which she alluded to the negroes and the calabash. She meant only to soften the harshness of her comments on Rosamund and the two foreigners, but it was obvious now that she could have written nothing more harmful to Warden's mission.

And then, with a sudden horror that made her white to the lips, she realized what it meant — that Warden had never received her letter, that Rosamund had adroitly availed herself of the details it contained, and that her lover had gone to Africa with a lurking doubt in his heart of the one woman in the world whom he trusted. Did he think her really the base creature she was depicted? Oh, it was intolerable! She would never forgive Mrs. Laing — no, never! Her rival had stooped to a meanness that could not be borne — she must be punished, with a vengeance at once swift and merciless.

All this was very un-Christian, and wholly unlike the delightfully shy yet lovable girl to whom Warden lost his heart during the midsummer madness of Cowes and Plymouth, but Evelyn was stirred to the depths of a passionate nature; not for the first time in Las Palmas, she cried herself to sleep.

She awoke in a better frame of mind, though still determined to bring Mrs. Laing to her knees at the first opportunity. Keeping the tryst with Peter, she took him fully into her confidence. He was able to supply many minor items of information that fitted the pieces of the puzzle more accurately together. He did not know what had become of Warden, but Evelyn made no scruple of telling him the facts within her knowledge.

She recked little of Government secrets and the byways of Imperial politics. The ex-pilot and his sturdy offspring were now the only witnesses of her good faith. Perhaps they might meet Warden in England before he was able to communicate with her. In that event, she wanted Peter to be in a position to do for her lover what he had done for her, and disabuse Warden's mind of the cloud of lies by which it had been darkened.

Father and son were returning at once by the outgoing mail steamer. She pressed Peter to accept what little money she could spare, but he would not take a penny.

"No, miss," he said, with emphatic head-shaking. "There's some shot left in the locker yet, an' me an'

the Cap'n will 'ave a reckonin' w'en he comes 'ome. If I'm short of a pound or two afore I get the *Nancy* in commission this spring, I'll ax that gentleman at the bank for it. P'raps you'll write 'im a line, an 'say I've kep' me contract."

She had to be content with that. Were it practicable, she would have gone back to England in the same steamer. Here, in Las Palmas, she felt so utterly unbefriended. Though thousands of miles nearer Africa than in England, she seemed to be more thousands of miles removed from the chance of receiving a letter or a cablegram. True, she possessed a very useful acquaintance in the commander of the *Valiant*, but she could hardly expect one of His Majesty's cruisers to fly to and fro in the East Atlantic in order to keep her conversant with developments in Nigeria. Peter, however, undertook to call at the Colonial Office, while she would cable him her address after the lapse of a fortnight. Then, if there was any news of Warden, he would communicate with her.

At luncheon she had her first meeting with Mrs. Laing since the arrival of that epoch-marking letter. A special menu was ordered, and the table was gay with flowers, for the Baumgartners dearly loved a lord, and were resolved to make the most of their friendly relations with the Earl of Fairholme.

Mr. Baumgartner looked worried and preoccupied. The coming of the mail which meant so much to Evelyn perhaps had its importance for him also. At any rate, he left the entertainment of his guests largely

to his wife, until a sharp clash of wits rudely dispelled his reverie.

Beryl Baumgartner was the unconscious agent that brought about an unforeseen crisis. Her restless eyes speedily caught the glint of diamonds on Evelyn's left hand, and she cried ecstatically:

"Oh, Evelyn, what a lovely ring! Where did you get it?"

Each woman at the table was on the *qui vive* instantly. In a place like Las Palmas the mere mention of a diamond ring in connection with a young and pretty girl suggests that one more infatuated male has voluntarily removed his name from the list of eligibles.

Evelyn, having stilled the volcano that raged over night, might have allowed the opportunity to pass if she had not happened to catch the mocking smile on Rosamund's face when the nature of the ring became self-evident. That steeled her intent.

"It is my engagement ring," she said quietly.

"What?" shrieked Beryl, to whom this was news indeed. "Who is he?"

"You do not know him, dear, but his name is Captain Warden. He is at present in West Africa, somewhere near the Benuë River."

"And did he send it to you?"

"Yes. I received it only last night. It would have reached me four months ago, had not Mrs. Laing stolen one of my letters — perhaps others as well — and that naturally led to some confusion."

There was a moment of stupefied silence at the

table. Everybody seemed to be stricken dumb. Rosamund, crimson with anger, could only mutter:

"What insolence!"

"It is an unpleasant thing to say, but it is true," said Evelyn, discussing her rival's transgression in the most matter-of-fact tone, though she was conscious of a queer tingling at the roots of her hair, and she hardly recognized the sound of her own voice.

Baumgartner felt it imperative to stop what threatened to develop into a scandal.

"Miss Dane, you are making a serious charge against a lady of the highest repute," he said, in his best chairman-of-the-company style.

"I mean it, every word," cried Evelyn, a trifle more vehemently. "Lord Fairholme, am I speaking the truth or not?" she demanded, suddenly wheeling round on the inoffensive peer.

"Really — er — really ——" he spluttered, for once too bewildered to grin.

"Please tell Mr. Baumgartner what happened in the hall at Lochmerig when Mrs. Laing asked the postman to give her a letter addressed to Captain Arthur Warden, at Ostend. You were present. It was my letter she obtained. Perhaps she has it yet if her boxes were searched."

Here was no timid girl striving vainly to bolster up a false accusation, but a fiery young goddess impeaching an erring mortal. The atmosphere was electrical; Beryl Baumgartner said afterwards that she felt pins and needles attacking her at all points!

"I'm awfully sorry, Miss Dane, but I gave very little attention to the incident," said Fairholme, partly recovering himself.

"But you remembered Captain Warden's name last night? Was it not at Lochmerig that you heard it, and from Mrs. Laing?"

"Well — yes, but, you know, Mrs. Laing might have written to him."

"She did, after obtaining the address from my letter and reading what I wrote."

Then she turned on Rosamund with magnificent disdain.

"Shall I give you a copy of your letter? Captain Warden has sent it to me."

Sheer fury enabled Rosamund to regain her self-control.

"Your foolish attack on me is disproved out of your own mouth," she said, striving desperately to speak with her accustomed nonchalance. "Captain Warden has not written to you since I saw him in London. He is in Africa, it is true, but he has never been heard of after going ashore at Rabat fully three months ago. How can you pretend that you received a letter from him last night? My authority is an Under Secretary of State. Pray, who is yours?"

Under other conditions, Evelyn might have been warned by the imperious command to "hold her tongue" that Baumgartner telegraphed to his wife when that good lady was minded to interfere. But no consideration would stop her now. The memory

of all she had suffered through the machinations of one evilly disposed woman upset her calm judgment. In other respects, she acted with a restraint that was worthy of a first-rate actress; people at the next table might have thought she was discussing the weather. Taking Warden's letter from her pocket, she handed it to Lord Fairholme.

"I cited you as a witness," she said. "Will you now act as a judge? Read that, and tell my friends which of us two is speaking truly."

Despite his self-supposed shortcomings, Fairholme was a gentleman. Instinctively he believed Evelyn, but he shrank from the duty she entrusted to him.

"Oh, I say," he bleated, "hasn't this thing gone a bit too far already? Is it worth all the beastly fuss? There may be a mistake somewhere, you know. I'm sure, Miss Dane, nobody doubts your statement where this lucky chap Warden is concerned, an', on the other hand, don't you know, Mrs. Laing may have a perfectly fair explanation of the other business. So let it go at that, eh, what?"

"May I act as arbitrator?" said Baumgartner. "If I glance through your letter, Miss Dane, I may discover a means of settlement."

Something in his tone, some hint of a crafty purpose behind the smooth-spoken words, beat through the haze of wrath and grief that clouded Evelyn's mind. She could trust Fairholme with her lover's letter, but not Baumgartner. To reveal to him what Warden had said about Mrs. Laing's extraordinarily accurate

knowledge of proceedings in the Solent and affairs in Nigeria would be tantamount to betraying her lover's faith.

With splendid calmness she took the letter from the table and replaced it in her pocket.

"No, thank you, Mr. Baumgartner," she said, "if Lord Fairholme declines to help me, nobody else can take his place. I appealed to him because he is aware that Mrs. Laing induced your groom to unlock the post-box and hand her my letter. The proof of my words lies here. It is for him to say whether or not he is satisfied he saw Mrs. Laing commit a theft."

Fairholme shook his head. He was not lacking in pluck, and his artificial humor was only the veneer of an honest nature, but he surprised a look in Rosamund's eyes that startled him. She was pale now, ashen pale. She uttered no word, but continued to glower at Evelyn with a suppressed malevolence that was more threatening than the mere rage of a detected trickster.

His lordship evidently thought it high time Baumgartner or his wife exercised their authority.

"Don't you think this matter has gone quite far enough?" he asked, glancing from one to the other, and avoiding the eyes of either Evelyn or Mrs. Laing.

"Yes," said Baumgartner, speaking with a pomposity that contrasted sharply with his prompt offer to supplant Fairholme as judge. "This absurd dispute about a purely private affair must end at once. I and

my family are going to Europe by the next mail steamer ——"

"Isadore!" gasped his wife.

"Father, you can't mean it!" cried Beryl, who, at the lowest calculation, had made arrangements for a good three weeks' further frivolity at Las Palmas.

"Unfortunately, I am quite in earnest."

The financier looked it. Despite his magisterial air, his puffy face was drawn and haggard, and he had the aspect of a man who needed rest and sleep.

"You will accompany us, of course, Miss Dane," he went on, speaking slowly, as though he were groping for the best way out of a difficulty. "Your quarrel with Mrs. Laing can be much more easily adjusted in England than here. I hope, therefore, we shall be spared further bickering during our brief stay in the Canaries."

"But, father dear," put in his daughter, "you said we were going home on the yacht, and calling at Gibraltar and Algiers."

"I have changed my plans," he retorted curtly, and that was all he would say on the subject.

Evelyn left the table at the earliest moment. When too late, she regretted the impulse that led her to declare open war against Mrs. Laing. But it was done now. Those words "theft" and "steal" were irrevocable. She had retreated to a nook in the garden where a dense clump of tropical trees and shrubs gave shelter from the sun, and was trying to discover if she had imperilled the success of Warden's mission by any

unguarded phrase, when Lord Fairholme came to her.

"May I sit down here a few minutes?" he asked. "I want to try to understand things."

"I should be sorry to test your lordship's capacity so greatly," she said. She had not yet forgiven him for not taking her part. She was young; her world was tumbling about her ears; she believed that everybody ought to stand aghast at Rosamund's wickedness.

"Oh, come now, that's a bit severe, isn't it?" grinned Fairholme. "You don't make allowances for the ruffled feelin's of a poor fellow who has just had his image battered ——"

"Will you please tell me what you are talking about?"

"Eh — beg pardon, I meant idol shattered. Silly mistake, eh, what?"

Evelyn's lips relaxed in a smile. There was no resisting "Billy" when (in his own phrase) he was goin' strong.

"I fear you all thought me very rude," she said, with a pathetic little gesture of helplessness. "But what was I to do? — listen in silence to fresh insults?"

"I think you did the only possible thing."

"Then why did you refuse to bear out my statement?"

"There were reasons. May I see that letter now?"

"Have you come of your own accord?" she asked.

Evelyn fighting for the man she loved was a very different girl from the proud, disdainful Evelyn who, twenty-four hours earlier, would have endured almost any infliction rather than flout her adversary in a

public dining-room. She credited Rosamund with the adoption of any petty device to gain her ends, and felt that Fairholme was just the man to be used as a stalking-horse.

"No," he said, "or rather, yes — and no. I am anxious to know the truth, but Baumgartner suggested that I ought to accept your offer of reading the evidence. Don't you see, he has to consider the future a bit."

"In what way?"

"Well, if Mrs. Laing stole a letter in his house, she — it's a jolly hard thing to say — but she must be warned off."

Baumgartner as a guardian of morals was a new conception. Evelyn felt that a more powerful foe than Rosamund was in the field. Her unimportant romance had suddenly widened out into the world-domain of politics. She must decide quickly and decide right. In that vital moment she realized that her postscript to the Lochmerig letter might have consequences far beyond their effect on Warden's fortunes and her own.

"Lord Fairholme," she said, turning so that she could watch the slightest change in the expression of his face, "does Mr. Baumgartner strike you as a man who would go out of his way to interfere in a dispute between two women?"

"Not unless there was money in it," said Fairholme cheerfully.

"Then why is he showing such interest now in a matter which he deliberately closed at luncheon?"

"I gave you his explanation. Even Baumgartner likes to associate with people of good character."

"No, that is not the reason. Mr. Baumgartner is engaged at this moment in a plot against British dominion in West Africa. You see that cruiser in the harbor? Well, she is here to watch the *Sans Souci.* You yourself heard to-day that our party is going to Europe by the mail steamer. Why, when the *Sans Souci* is at our disposal? I will tell you. The British authorities believe that the yacht will help, or further in some way, a native rising in Southern Nigeria. Now, the letter in my possession, read by any one who could extract its inner meaning, would yield a valuable clue to the amount of information at the disposal of the home government. If you, without knowing this, answered Mr. Baumgartner's questions as to its contents, you would be doing the gravest injury to Great Britain."

"By gad!" exclaimed Fairholme.

"You can easily assure yourself that I am not exaggerating the facts. Here is the letter. Read it, and remember what I have told you."

Fairholme pursed his lips and bent his brows in deep mental effort. He held the letter in his hand unopened during this unusual and seemingly painful process. Then he gave it back to Evelyn.

"No, Miss Dane," he said emphatically. "I'm far too candid an ass to be laden with state secrets. Now, if you wouldn't mind just pickin' out the bits that refer to Mrs. Laing, an' skippin' all the political part,

I'll be able to bounce old Baumgartner for all he's worth."

"But I cannot. It is the political part which proves that my letter was stolen."

"Same thing! Change the names. Turn West Africa into Newmarket, an' call the Emperor Lord Rosebery."

"The Emperor," said Evelyn, surprised at Fairholme's chance shot.

"He's in it, I guess. He has his finger in every pie, an' some of 'em have bin jolly hot. Now, go ahead. If it's at all awkward, leave me to fill in a bit about the Ditch Mile an' the Epsom gradients that will bamboozle Baumgartner."

Evelyn did her best. Fairholme was delighted with Warden's description of the baccarat and roulette incidents, but his face lengthened when he heard Rosamund's allusions to himself. Once, Evelyn forgot his stipulation, and spoke of the "men of Oku."

"Oku," broke in Fairholme, "where is that?"

"It is a savage native state in West Africa. That is the one name you must not remember, Lord Fairholme."

He did not interrupt again till she had finished reading. Then she told him how Peter Evans had brought her the ring and the letter; and, finding him sympathetic, she explained the extraordinary chance that led to Warden's capture by a Mohammedan fanatic at Rabat.

"Funny thing!" he said, when she had made an

end. "That chap Figuero joined my steamer at Lisbon."

"He is not here?" cried Evelyn, genuinely startled, for she feared Figuero.

"Yes, he is. I fancy he's on board the *Sans Souci*. I didn't speak to him; I have a notion that he didn't recognize me under my new name. We also picked up a number of German officers at the same port, but they left us at Funchal, where another ship took them on to the Cameroons. That is German West Africa, isn't it?"

"I believe so. My geographical knowledge of this part of the world is of the vaguest. It dates chiefly from last night."

"When the naval Johnny was showing you the map, I suppose?"

"But how do you know that?" she demanded, and another wave of surprise flooded her face with color.

"Mrs. Laing and I watched you for quite a time — the watchin' was involuntary on my part, but she wouldn't come away from the veranda, an' now I know why. You will observe, Miss Dane, that I have bin the goat all through the proceedin's."

"I can hardly say that."

"No, you wouldn't. But it's true. The only bit of luck I've had is that I am saved the painful necessity of bein' refused as a husband by Mrs. Laing. I came here to ask her to marry me."

"Oh, I am so sorry ——" began Evelyn, but Fairholme's cackling laugh checked her.

"Why sorry? You've done me a good turn, twice over, an' if I can do you one, just ask. In the first place, she would probably have said 'No,' and in the second, where should I have been if she said 'Yes.' In the soup, eh, what?"

Lord Fairholme seemed to pride himself on his narrow escape, and gave Evelyn the credit of rescuing him. She protested that if she had known he was really bent on marrying Mrs. Laing she would neither have attacked the latter in his presence nor called on him to bear out her statements. But he refused to admit that she had conferred other than a favor on him, and repeated his desire to serve her if the opportunity offered. It came quickly.

That night, when Evelyn was sound asleep, her room was entered and Warden's letter taken. It lay with the ring and some other trinkets on a dressing-table. The door was locked and bolted, but the window was wide open to admit the sea breeze, and, although the room was on the third floor, and therefore some forty feet or more above the ground level, it was impossible that the thief could have entered it except through the window. That the letter alone was the objective was shown by the fact that the exceedingly valuable ring was left untouched. There was almost a hint of malicious humor in the discrimination exercised. An ordinary criminal, though bribed to procure a document of great importance to some other person, would certainly have made away with any jewelry that was lying handy. In this instance, there

seemed to be an unspoken warning to the girl that she was powerless in the toils that surrounded her.

At first, she suspected Rosamund of complicity in this new theft, but when she asked herself who had most to gain from the perusal of the letter, suspicion pointed, not to Rosamund, who could guess its contents with fair accuracy, but to Baumgartner and his associates, who were evidently more afraid of one man than of the armed might of Britain.

In the height of her distress her employer came to her.

"We have decided to return by the Portuguese mail from Madeira," he said, "and in order to catch the next steamer we shall sail in the *Sans Souci* to-night. Would it be convenient for you to go aboard the yacht this afternoon?"

"But what action am I to take with regard to my stolen letter?" she demanded. "You heard what I said to Mrs. Laing. That letter is my evidence against her."

"It may have blown out of your window. There is generally a strong breeze just before dawn. At any rate, it is better lost. Such disputes are useless."

"But it was of the utmost importance in other ways."

"Young ladies' love-letters always are," he gurgled with forced laughter. "Still, if it really has gone, you can hardly propose to remain in Las Palmas on the off chance that it may be recovered."

She felt that she was trapped, but for what purpose it was hard to imagine. Lord Fairholme had told her already that Baumgartner was very much annoyed

with him for failing to remember what Warden had written, and it was now beyond doubt that the *Sans Souci's* voyage to Funchal was a blind for some ulterior object.

In her dilemma, she thought of Mortimer. When Baumgartner went away, she hurried out of the hotel and drove straight to the harbor. A boat brought her to the *Valiant;* the commander himself met her at the gangway, and escorted her to his cabin.

"Sorry I couldn't call last evening Miss Dane," he said, "but I was detained on board unexpectedly. Things are happening, I hear."

"Yes. Figuero is here, and we leave on the yacht for Funchal to-night."

He smiled.

"Is that the dodge?" he exclaimed. "Of course, I was posted in the movements of the Portuguese and his friends, but the trip to Madeira is clever. What has caused the change of programme?"

She told him, and he banged a clenched fist emphatically on a table which a steward had just arranged for tea.

"For once, I can find it in my heart to wish you were a man," he cried. "A steamer starts for Lagos within two hours, and it would be a fine thing if the Nigeria administration heard your story from your own lips. Of course, I can write, but it is difficult to put on paper one's guesses and surmises at the trickery that is going on."

The words were scarcely uttered ere a wild notion leaped into Evelyn's brain. Why should she not go

to Lagos? She might be able to clear away some of the doubts and misgivings that must have gathered around Warden's name. Above all else, if there was news of him, it would surely reach the officials there long before it became known in England.

"If I were a man," she said tremulously, "would you pay my passage on that ship?"

"Of course. You would be traveling on Government service."

"Then I shall go. Please arrange matters for me, and send some one to take me on board."

"Do you mean it?" he cried.

"Yes."

"By Jove, Miss Dane, you astonish me more each time I see you. But how about the Baumgartners?"

"I shall simply write a note resigning my situation. It is a mere question of doing that to-day or three weeks hence. But I shall not tell them why I am leaving their service so suddenly."

"Baumgartner will find out. Unless I am much mistaken, it will worry him. Now, you are sure you intend to take this trip?"

"Quite certain."

"Very well. I shall give myself the pleasure of calling for you at three o'clock."

Evelyn packed her boxes as speedily as possible. Counting her money, she found she had only twenty-five pounds. But there was that new treasure, the ring. How better could she use it than in furthering the interests of the man she loved? She wondered if

Lord Fairholme would lend her fifty pounds on its security? A note brought him to her room, and she explained briefly that she meant to visit Lagos, and might need more funds than she had at her command.

"Well, that beats the band," he said. "Mrs. Laing is going there too."

"Not on to-day's steamer?" she protested, for it seemed that an unkind fate was conspiring against her.

"Sure thing! Heard her tellin' Beryl an hour ago."

Though Evelyn wished heartily that her rival had chosen any other route of the many which lead from Las Palmas, her resolution remained unaltered. But there was another thrill in store for her.

"Tell you what, Miss Dane," said Fairholme, "I don't think you ought to tackle an expedition of this sort single-handed. You may want some one to pull you out of a tight place — what price me as a puller-out? I'm a pretty useless sort of chap in most things, but there is no reason why I shouldn't try to do my country a good turn once in a way. Let me go with you, and then you'll have no need to worry about coin."

"You are really very kind," she faltered, "but — but ——"

"You are afraid of Mrs. Laing again," he grinned. "Don't worry yourself about her, dear girl. Not even Mrs. Grundy can growl at me for bein' your fellow-passenger. I'm mixed up in this business, an', by Jove, I mean to see it through. Look here, can't you adopt me as a sort of elder brother, an' make it 'Billy' an' 'Evelyn,' an' that sort of thing — eh, what?"

CHAPTER XIV

THE DRUMS OF OKU

Evelyn, ferried across the harbor by a boat's crew from the warship, boarded the *Estremadura* in almost regal state. The vessel's cabin accommodation was poor, but the English girl was given of its best. Not every day does a small West African trader receive a passenger under the escort of a peer of the realm and a Captain in the Royal Navy. It was an interesting moment when Rosamund Laing, accompanied by Figuero, came alongside. The Portuguese made off at once, but the lady, when it was too late to retreat, affected a blank indifference to Evelyn's presence that showed how conscious she was of it. She seldom appeared on deck, ate each meal in the seclusion of her cabin, and spoke no word, even to Lord Fairholme. On arriving at Lagos she hurried from the ship, and Evelyn breathed a sigh of relief as she watched her enemy go ashore.

She did not carry her dislike of Mrs. Laing to the point of imagining her to be in active co-operation with the plotters against British supremacy in that quarter of the world. It was far more probable that a rich woman who drew some part of her revenues from

factories on the coast might be combining business with the desire to obtain news of Warden at first hand. At any rate, the girl fondly hoped they might never meet again, and she trusted to the strength of her own story, supplemented by a letter from Captain Mortimer to the Governor, to place her beyond the reach of misrepresentation.

But her troubles, instead of diminishing, became even more pronounced when she called at Government House. Both she and Lord Fairholme were entirely ignorant of local conditions. Neither of them knew that Lagos, though the chief West African port, and practically the only safe harbor on the Guinea Coast, was the capital of an administration quite separate from that of North and of South Nigeria. To reach Old Calabar, the headquarters of Warden's service, they must take a long journey down the coast and penetrate some forty miles into the Niger delta. Captain Mortimer, in all probability, thought she was aware of this vital distinction, but, at the outset, Evelyn almost felt that she had undertaken a useless task.

Her manifest distress at an unpleasing discovery won her the sympathy of the deputy Governor of Lagos, his chief having crossed from the island to the mainland only the day before. But sympathy could not altogether cloak a skepticism that was galling in the extreme. He was fully acquainted with the position of affairs in the sister protectorate, he said. He appreciated Captain Mortimer's motives in wishing to acquaint the Government of Nigeria with certain

curious circumstances which might or might not be connected with tribal uneasiness in the Benuë River districts, but the fact remained that all was quiet now in that region.

"Owing to Captain Warden's unfortunate disappearance," he went on, "another commissioner visited Oku. He found matters there in a fairly settled state. The people were cultivating their lands with greater assiduity than such semi-cannibals usually display, and this is a sure sign of content in a West African community. Indeed, Captain Forbes is now about to return to headquarters. A few companies of Hausa constabulary, who were moved to more convenient centers in case a strong column was required for an expedition to the Benuë, are going back to their original cantonments. The incident is ended."

The official tone was blandly disconcerting. Evelyn was aware that the deputy Governor looked on her somewhat in the light of a runaway schoolgirl, who had no reason whatever to bother her pretty head about the business of a prosperous and thriving colony.

"You seem to imply that the Home authorities acted in a panic," she said, wondering if it were really true that Warden and the men he had seen in London were laboring under a delusion.

"No. They misread the motives of the Nigeria administration in curtailing Captain Warden's furlough — that is all. There undoubtedly were rumors of some border disturbances. The people in that region hinted that the Oku men were arranging what

they term a Long Ju-ju. There was also a trading activity on the part of our neighbors that gave rise to unpleasant suspicions. To be forewarned is to be forearmed, and His Excellency the Governor regarded Captain Warden as the man who could best deal with and remove any causes of discontent. Within the last two months, however, all unfavorable symptoms have vanished, and Oku is now as quiet as Old Calabar, or Lagos itself."

"I am glad of it," she said earnestly. "It is far from my wish to figure as a messenger of strife. May I revert to a more personal matter? If Captain Warden has succeeded in crossing the Sahara, when and where may I reasonably expect to hear of him?"

The deputy Governor stroked his chin. He was a kind-hearted man, and circumstances had prepared him for that question.

"It is hard to say," he answered, "Assuming he reaches Timbuktu in safety, he can follow that course of the Upper Niger, through what is known as the Dahomey hinterland, until he arrives at Ilo, the first town in the British sphere of influence in that direction. Thence to the sea, at this season, the river is navigable. If he makes for Lagos — having been ordered here in the first instance — he might strike overland from Jebbu to the railhead at Ibadan, but if he sticks to the river and goes to his own headquarters, by remaining here you should obtain telegraphic information of his arrival at a town called Lokoja, situated at the junction of the Niger and the Benuë."

He paused. His brief review conveyed no hint to his hearer of the tremendous difficulties any man must overcome ere he reached the comparative civilization of the telegraph, and he flinched from the task of enlightening her.

"Is it quite certain," he asked, "that Captain Warden went ashore at Rabat?"

The astonishment in Evelyn's face was almost sufficient answer.

"Unless every one in some Government department in London has gone mad, it is quite certain," she cried. "Did not an officer from Nigeria go to meet him at Cape Coast Castle, and is it not evident that he went to Hassan's Tower to obtain the ruby I have told you of?"

The official smiled. He had effectually distracted her thoughts from the far more embarrassing topic of Warden's chances of reaching Nigeria alive.

"One learns to distrust circumstantial evidence, Miss Dane. Have you heard that the passenger on the *Water Witch* was known as Mr. Alfred Williams? Yes? Well, we do not know Captain Warden. We have no means here of identifying the baggage landed by the captain of the *Water Witch* when he reported the Rabat incident. Could you recognize any of Captain Warden's belongings?"

"No," said Evelyn blankly — "that is, I fear not."

"You mentioned a gourd. I have not seen the thing myself, but one of my assistants says that a most

remarkable object of that nature was found in one of the missing man's boxes."

"Ah, I should know that anywhere," and she shuddered at the recollection of the evil face whose appearance had so strangely synchronized with the stormy events of her recent life.

"Well, have you any objection to examining the gourd now? If it is the undoubted article you picked up in the Solent, it goes far to prove that Captain Warden did really take passage on the *Water Witch.*"

"I cannot imagine how you can think otherwise," she declared. "Of course it was he!"

"There is no harm in making sure," he said, having already decided to entrust to his wife the trying duty of making known to this charming girl the almost certain fact that her lover was long since dead.

The calabash was brought and taken from its canvas wrapper. Oddly enough, mildew had formed on its bright lacquer, and the sheen of the mosaic eyes was dulled. It had lost some of its artistic power, and was far from being the terrifying creation that scared her so badly when first she saw it on the deck of the *Nancy.*

"Yes, that is it," she said. "You see, this crown is really a lid, and the piece of vellum, or parchment, was hidden inside. It is not there now, yet it is more than likely that Captain Warden kept them both together."

The servant who had brought the calabash was sent back to search for the tattooed skin. He soon returned

with it, and the deputy Governor examined the two curios with manifest interest.

"It is not native work," he said. "I have never seen anything just like it, even in museums at home."

Moved by an impulse which she could never afterwards explain, Evelyn asked if both the gourd and the parchment might be given to her.

"They are really mine," she explained sadly. "Captain Warden asked me to accept the carved head, as it was I who discovered it. But I was afraid of it then. Now, I should be pleased to have it in my possession. It brought us together in the first instance. Perhaps it may do the same thing a second time."

"Nigeria is the home of the ju-ju — may this fetish prove a lucky one!" said the official gravely. "Take it, by all means, Miss Dane, but let no native see it, or you will attract a notoriety that I am sure you would dislike. Meanwhile, I shall telegraph to Old Calabar asking for news, though I should certainly have heard if Warden had turned up already."

That same afternoon the deputy Governor's wife called on Evelyn, and invited her to come and stay at her house, urging that she would find residence in a private family vastly preferable to the hotel in which she had passed the previous night. For fully three weeks she lived with this most friendly and hospitable lady. By degrees, as they became more intimate, her new acquaintance gathered the threads of the unusual story in which the girl figured so prominently. Similarly, as Evelyn gained more knowledge of African

affairs, she could not help but discover that it would be nothing less than a miracle if Warden ever reached Nigeria. The difficulties facing even a well-equipped expedition on the desert route were so great that all but the most enthusiastic explorers shrank from them. How, then, could one white man, accompanied by a solitary Hausa, hope to overcome them? The deputy Governor scouted the idea that Warden could raise a caravan at Bel Abbas. He was dubious about the incidents reported from Lektawa, but he made no secret of the utter improbability that Warden would have the means of buying camels and hiring men for the dangerous journey outlined by Captain Mortimer. And, to complete Evelyn's dismay, the Southern Nigeria administration sent the most positive assurances that Warden had not been heard of in the upper river districts.

She learned incidentally that Mrs. Laing had gone to Lokoja in a river steamer. Her hostess believed that Rosamund had found out the latest version of Warden's adventures, and cherished a faint hope that even yet she might forestall Evelyn. No small consideration would take her so far into the interior, especially as the journey was both risky and useless.

"But that need not trouble you at all, my dear," said her outspoken friend. "If Captain Warden lives, you can rest assured that my husband will hear of him long before Mrs. Laing hears. I am afraid that if news comes at all, it will reach us in the form of a native rumor that a white man died of fever away

up there beyond the hills. It is always fever — never a spear thrust or a quantity of powdered glass mixed with a man's food. The natives are loyal enough to each other in that respect. Even when they know the truth, it is almost impossible to get them to tell it."

So now it was death, and not life, that was talked of, and Evelyn lived on in dry-eyed misery until Fairholme hinted one day that she ought to return home, as the climate was beginning to affect her health.

There were not lacking indications that the merry-souled little peer had quickly reconciled himself to the loss of Mrs. Laing. He was the most popular man in Lagos, and he hardly ever visited Evelyn when he did not assure her that he was "havin' a giddy time with the dear girls." Yet she knew that he was only waiting until the last hope of Warden's escape from the desert must be abandoned. When that hour came, and she was prepared to take ship for England, Fairholme would ask her to marry him.

The belief became an obsession. To get away from it, to cut herself wholly adrift from painful associations, she offered her help to an American Baptist missionary and his wife who were going up the Benuë. They tried to dissuade her, pointing out the hardships and positive dangers of the undertaking and the humdrum nature of the nursing, teaching, and doctoring that constituted the lot of a medical missionary in West Africa. Finally, they consented, but stipulated that she should give her new career a six months' trial.

Fairholme protested, and stormed, and was only prevented from proposing on the spot by Evelyn's placid statement that no matter what the future might decide, she should not be happy unless she had visited the little-known land to which her lover had given the best years of his life.

The reference to Warden effectually sealed his lips. He hastened to the club, asked a man to dine with him, drank the larger part of a bottle of champagne, and mournfully informed his friends that he had never enjoyed a moment's real fun since he ceased to be hard up.

So Evelyn said good-by to the hospitable people who entertained her at Lagos, and made the long voyage up the great river that perplexed mankind during so many centuries. Even yet its whole course has not been surveyed, and it has important tributaries that are unknown beyond their confluence with the main stream. But the river steamer followed the established trade route through Old Calabar and Asabao and Idah to Lokoja; thence a steam launch took the small party of Europeans up the Benuë to Ibi, and they completed the journey in a roofed boat of shallow draft manned by krooboys.

The girl seemed now to have left behind the cares and troubles of the outer world. Busying herself with the daily life of the mission compound — once a stockaded trading-station and noted center for the distribution of gin, but now a peaceful hive of simple tuition and industry — she soon experienced a calm

sense of duty accomplished that had certainly been denied her in the Baumgartner household. At Lagos she had received one letter from Beryl, who complained bitterly of her "desertion." A police patrol-boat brought her a letter from home, in which her stepmother expressed the strongest disapproval of her new departure as announced by a hurried note sent from Lagos. And that was all. The links that bound her with England were completely snapped. She might almost be the kidnapped Domenico Garcia, of whom she thought occasionally when some chance aspect of a negro's face startled her by its close resemblance to the black mask on the calabash.

Mindful of the Lagos official's warning, she never showed the carved head to any one. Not even Mr. and Mrs. Hume, the mission couple, knew that it was in her possession.

She had been nearly two months in Kadana, as the group of houses and huts in the clearing by the side of the yellow Benuë was called, when an apparently trivial incident upset the placid routine of the mission. One evening, just before sunset, a ju-ju man, fearsomely bedaubed, and decked with an amazing headdress and skirt of scarlet feathers, came into the native section of the compound. He cut off the head of an unhappy fowl that he carried with him, sprinkled its warm blood in a circle on the ground, chanted some hoarse incantation, and vanished into the bush.

The white people saw him from a distance. They happened to be standing on the veranda of an old

factory used as a schoolhouse and dwelling, and Mr. Hume was greatly annoyed by the witch-doctor's visit.

"This will unsettle every native for a week or two," he said, eying the man's antics with evident disfavor. "Those fellows are a far more enduring curse to Africa than the gin traffic. Governments can legislate gin out of existence, but they cannot touch ju-ju."

"We are doing something in that direction here," said Evelyn, glancing over her shoulder at the rows of woolly-headed little black figures in the class-room.

"Yes, we are educating the children, but their parents will undo to-night all that we have accomplished since our return. Look at Bambuk. He has mixed with Europeans during the past ten years, yet he is white with terror."

It was an odd phrase to use with regard to a negro, but it was quite accurate. Bambuk, interpreter, head servant, and factotum-in-chief to the mission, who was peering through the doorway at the proceedings of the ju-ju man, showed every sign of alarm when he saw the fowl-killing ceremony. His ebony face, usually shining and jovial looking, became livid and drawn. His eyes glistened like those of a frightened animal.

Turning for a second to make sure that the children were not listening, he drew near and whispered:

"Oku man make war ju-ju. Him say all black people lib for bush, or dem King of Oku nail ebery one to tree w'en he burn mission."

Bambuk could speak far better English than that. The fact that he had reverted so thoroughly to the jargon of the krooboy proved the extent of his fear.

Hume affected to make light of the witch-doctor and his threats.

"Go and tell him to stop his nonsense," he said. "Say I have a bale of cotton here which I brought especially from Lagos as a present for King M'Wanga."

But before Bambuk could descend the broad flight of steps leading from the veranda, the fetish performance was at an end and its chief actor had rushed off among the trees.

Evelyn felt a chill run through her body, though the air was hot and vapor-laden.

"Is M'Wagna the name of the King of Oku?" she asked.

"I believe so. I have been absent nearly eight months, as you are aware, but I haven't heard of any change in the local dynasty."

"Do you think it likely that he has ever visited England?"

"Most improbable," said Hume. "He is an absolute savage. I have seen him only once, and I should be sorry to think that my life depended on his good will. But why did you imagine he might have been in England?"

"Because a native of that name came there with two others last August."

"We have been visited by ju-ju men before, Charles," put in Mrs. Hume.

"Yes. Generally they come begging for something they want — usually drugs — which they pretend to concoct themselves out of a snake's liver or the gizzard of a bird. Don't lay too much stress on Bambuk's fright. He is a chicken-hearted fellow at the best. If there is really any likelihood of a native disturbance I shall send him with you and Miss Dane down the river ——"

"I shall not go without you, dear," said Mrs. Hume.

"Nor I — unless both of you come," answered Evelyn.

Hume laughed constrainedly.

"You will both obey orders, I hope," he said, but he did not urge the matter further at the moment.

They were eating their evening meal when the distant tapping of a drum caught their ears. It was not the rhythmical beating of a tom-tom by some musically-inclined bushman. It much more closely resembled the dot and dash code of the Morse alphabet, or that variant of it which Private Thomas Atkins, in a spasm of genius, christened "Umty-iddy." Heard in the stillness of the forest, with not a breath of air stirring the leaves of the tallest trees, and even the tawny river murmuring in so low a note that it was inaudible from the mission-house, this irregular drum-beating had a depressing, almost a sinister effect. It jarred on the nerves. It suggested the unseen and therefore the terrible. At all costs they must find out what it signified.

Bambuk was summoned. He was even more dis-

traught than during the fetish performance of two hours earlier.

"Dem Oku drum play Custom tune," he explained. "Dem Custom mean ——"

"Do you savvy what they are saying?" broke in Hume sharply. He did not imagine that his wife had discussed the habits of native potentates with her youthful helper, and even she herself did not know the full extent of the excesses, the sheer lust of bloodshed, hidden under a harmless-sounding word.

"Savvy plenty. Dem drum made of monkey-skin — p'haps other kind of skin — an' dem ju-ju man say: 'Come, come! Make sharp dem knife! Come! Load dem gun! Come, den, come! Dem ribber (river) run red wid blood!' Den dey nail some men to tree an' make dance."

The missionary did not check his assistant's recital. It was best that the women should at least understand the peril in which they were placed. The compound held not more than fifty able-bodied men, and the only arms they possessed were native weapons. Hume's influence depended wholly on his skill in treating the ailments of the people and his patience in teaching their children not only the rudiments of English but the simpler forms of handicraft. His experience as an African missioner was not of long standing, but from the outset he had consistently refused to own any firearm more deadly than a shotgun. Hitherto he had regarded the Upper Benuë region as a settled and fairly prosperous one. His cherished day-dream

was that before he died he might see the pioneer settlement at Kadana transmuted into a well-equipped college and training school, whence Christianity and science might spread their light throughout that part of Africa. It shocked him now to think that all his work might be submerged under a wave of fanaticism, yet he clung to the hope that the warlike preparations of the men of Oku might mean nothing more serious than a tribal quarrel. This had happened once before, and he stepped in as arbitrator. By a liberal distribution of presents, including the whole of the mission stock of wine and brandy, he sent away both parties highly gratified with both his award and his method of arriving at it.

"There are war-drums beating in more than one place," said Evelyn, who was listening in silence to the spasmodic tap-tap, tap-tap-tap, tap, that voiced the dirge translated by Bambuk.

"Ah, you have hit on my unspoken thought," cried Hume. "Come, now, Bambuk, are you not enlarging your story somewhat? Two chiefs make war-palaver; isn't that the explanation?"

"Dem Oku drum," repeated the native, "all Oku drum. Dey call for Custom to-night."

"What exactly *is* Custom, Charles?" said Mrs. Hume.

"Unfortunately, it means in this instance an offering of human sacrifice."

He saw no help for it. They must know, sooner or later, and his soul turned sick at the thought of his

wife and this gentle girl who had thrown in her lot with theirs falling into the clutches of the fetish-maddened bushmen. Each minute he grew more assured that some unusual movement was taking place among the surrounding tribes. Even to his untutored ear there was a marked similarity in the drumming, and he determined that the two women should go down the river in the mission canoe as soon as the moon rose. A crew of eight men could take them to the nearest constabulary post, and within twenty-four hours a steam launch would bring back an armed body of Hausas officered by an Englishman. Till then, he would trust to Providence for the safety of the people under his care. That he himself could desert the mission never entered his mind. Not only would the settlement break up in direst confusion the moment his back was turned, but the society's houses and stores would be looted and destroyed, and the work of years swept away in a single night.

He was considering what excuse would serve to get the women on board the canoe, when the splash of paddles close at hand stirred all four to sudden excitement. It was Bambuk who read instantly the meaning of this unexpected sound. He rushed out, yelling words that proved how soon the veneer of civilization can wear off the West African negro. Soon he came back, looking sick with fear.

"Dem dam pagan nigger make off in dem canoe," he almost screamed. "Dey savvy plenty too much bushman lib. We all be killed one-time."

Even Evelyn, new to the country and its ways, realized what this meant. The river was their only highway. There were native tracks in plenty through the dense forest, but to march along any one of them while a hostile force was lying across every path was to court immediate disaster. By running away from a peril which was only passive as yet, they made it active. On the river they might escape; in the bush they could not travel a mile except on native sufferance.

Hume tried bravely to minimize the force of this unlooked-for blow. It was true the fugitives might be expected to carry the alarm to the police post, but until the following night it was quite impossible for succor to reach Kadana. And now they must all stand or fall by the mission.

"I did not think any of our men would be such cowards," he said with quiet sadness. "Let us go and pacify the others. When all is said and done, we have harmed no one in Oku territory, but given relief to many who were in pain. I still believe that this scare is unwarranted, and our presence among our people will tend to calm them."

A minute later he was sorry he had not gone alone. Every hut in the compound was empty. Nearly two hundred men, women, and children had fled into the bush, preferring to obey the order of the ju-ju man rather than defy him by remaining in the mission. Bambuk had not been taken into their confidence because he was originally a Foulah Mohammedan. The colony at Kadana was precisely what Bambuk

had called its members in his rage, for the Mohammedan negro looks down upon his "pagan" brethren with supreme contempt. In a crisis such as that which now threatened to engulf the mission, these nice distinctions of class and creed are apt to spring into startling prominence.

Hume faced the situation gallantly.

"Another illusion shattered," he sighed. "Most certainly I did not expect that all my people would desert me at the first hint of danger. But we must make the best of it. Even now I cannot believe that the king of Oku — if it really is he who has created this disturbance — can contemplate an attack on Europeans. He has many faults, but he is not a fool, and he knows quite well how swift and complete would be his punishment if he interfered with us."

Mrs. Hume accepted her husband's views, and tried to look at matters with the same optimism. Evelyn, curiously enough, was better informed than even their native companion as to the serious nature of the outbreak. She was convinced that Warden's theory was correct. Some stronger influence than a mere tribal *émeute* lay behind those horrible drum-beats. The authorities had been completely hoodwinked. In her heart of hearts she feared that Kadana shared its deadly peril that night with many a stronger trading-post and station down the river.

Bambuk, quieting down from his earlier paroxysms of fear, seemed to await his certain doom with a dignified fatalism. Even when he heard the thud of

paddles on the sluggish waters of the river he announced the fact laconically.

"Bush man lib!" he muttered.

Perhaps the white faces blanched somewhat, and hearts beat a trifle faster, but Hume alone spoke.

"Where?" he asked.

"On ribber — in dem war canoe."

They strained their ears, and soon caught the measured plashing. Then Mrs Hume began to weep. Evelyn knelt by her side in mute sympathy. She was too dazed to find relief in tears. For the moment she seemed to be passing through a torturing dream from which she would soon awake. Hume, who had gone to the door, came to his wife.

"Don't cry, Mary," he said. "That does no good — and — it breaks my heart. I have not abandoned hope. God can save us even yet. Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do."

His voice was strong and self-reliant. Even Bambuk glanced at him with a kind of awe, and thought, it may be, that the creed he had tried dimly to understand was nobler than the mere stoicism that was the natural outcome of his own fantastic beliefs. The negro was stupid with terror, or he could not have failed to distinguish the steady hum of an engine running at half speed.

And so they waited, while the thud of the paddles came nearer, until at last the bow of a heavy craft crashed into the foliage overhanging the bank, and

they were rapt into a heaven of relief by hearing an English voice.

"Hello, there!" it shouted. "Is this the Kadana Mission?"

Mrs. Hume straightway fainted, but Evelyn was there to tend her, and Hume rushed down to the landing-place. The gleam of a moon rising over some low hills was beginning to make luminous the river mist. He was able dimly to note the difference between the pith hats of two Europeans and the smart round caps of a number of Hausa policemen. And, though a man of peace, he found the glint of rifle barrels singularly comforting.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Well," said he who had spoken in the first instance, "I am Lieutenant Colville of the constabulary, but I have brought with me the Earl of Fairholme. Have you a lady named Dane, Miss Evelyn Dane, staying with you?"

Hume, who wanted to fall on his knees and offer thanks to Providence, managed to say that Evelyn Dane was certainly at Kadana at that moment.

"Ah, that's the ticket!" said another voice. "I suppose you can put us up for the night? Any sort of shake-down will do, so long as we get away from this beastly river. Sleepin' on board gives one the jim-jams, eh, what?"

CHAPTER XV

WHEREIN ONE SURPRISE BEGETS MANY

Colville leaped ashore. Without appearing to hurry, he was quickly by Hume's side and asking in an undertone:

"Why has this war-drumming started? I heard it an hour ago down stream. Our engine was not running well, so the men got the paddles to work and we cracked on at top speed."

"I do not know," said the missionary, who was more anxious at the moment to reassure the women than to answer questions.

"But is there any bush fighting going on? Everything was reported to be all right when I left Ibi."

"May heaven be praised that you were prompted to visit us! My wife, Miss Dane, our interpreter and myself — four out of two hundred — alone remain in the mission. Some of our people stole the canoe and made off, and every other native in the compound has gone into the bush. When we heard your paddles just now we thought that the war canoes of the King of Oku were approaching. But please come with me to the house. The mere sight of your uniform will show the ladies that our danger is at an end."

Colville was young, but he was old in experience. He had also learned the exceeding wisdom of repressing opinions that were not called for.

"Wait a few seconds," he said. "Here is Lord Fairholme. But for his urgent wish to visit Miss Dane, we should not have been in Kadana to-night. Hello! Who the dev — what canoe is that?"

Even while he was speaking, another craft shot out from the dense layer of mist that hid the surface of the river. Though the trees on the opposite bank were clearly visible in the ever-spreading moonlight, the Benuë itself was invisible. A Hausa sergeant challenged from the launch, and the reply came in his own tongue. A small native boat, propelled by two paddles, grated on a strip of shingle, and an Arab and a negro stepped ashore.

By this time, Fairholme had joined Colville and had been introduced to Hume. The Arab, hardly waiting an instant for a response to a curt inquiry, stalked towards them. He was a tall man, gaunt but wiry, and he carried himself with the listless air of one barely convalescent after a severe illness.

But there was no trace of listlessness in his voice. He singled out Colville immediately as the officer in charge of the party, and addressed him in the Hausa language.

"You would better bring your men ashore, run the launch as far up the bank as possible, and barricade yourself in the strongest building available," he said. "The men of Oku are out. Three of their war canoes

are stationed at the bend in the river and their occupants are armed with Mannlicher rifles. Escape that way is impossible. Your only chance is to hold this post as long as Allah permits. I shall try to pass the blockading canoes and reach Ibi, though I fear it will be too late."

Colville hardly knew at which he was most amazed, the commanding tone of this haggard son of the desert or the astounding news he brought.

"Say, then, hadji," he cried, half ironically, "What plague has broken out in Oku that the whole line of the Benuë should be threatened."

"The chief plague is that of blindness among officers who fail to see the pits dug for them by crafty natives," was the stern answer. "I speak truly, young master. You have half an hour, at best an hour, in which to make preparations."

"But these war canoes you speak of — they are not at the bend; I have just come up stream."

"They passed but now. You did not see them for the mist. I accompanied them."

"Why did I not hear them?"

"They drifted down quietly lest they should arouse the mission."

"And yet you came here? Why?"

"To warn the mission people. Hurry, I pray you, and waste no time in useless talk."

"Oh, I say, Colville," broke in Fairholme who understood no word of this dialogue and wondered why the English officer should permit an Arab to detain him,

"can't Mr. Hume take me to Miss Dane? If she is as sick of this rotten river as I am she'll be jolly glad to see me."

"Certainly," said Colville. "I shall follow you soon. This chap seems to be able to explain matters, so I must remain here a few minutes."

Hume, eager to get away, led Fairholme in the direction of the house. The young soldier felt a strong hand grasp his shoulder, and an English voice whispered:

"Colville, don't you know me?"

They were standing in a cleared space where the moonbeams gave some degree of light. The Arab had pushed back his burnous, revealing a worn, handsome face, tanned brown with exposure. Though the characteristic traits of his supposed race are the heavy lip, and the hawk-like nose, this man was straight-nosed and thin-lipped. He was cadaverous enough, but no Arab.

Colville did more than gaze, he actually gaped at the other. There was no mistaking the cultured accent of an English gentleman, and yet — the thing could not be; he fancied he was bewitched.

"My dear Jimmie, have I changed so much, then, since last we played snooker together in the club?"

"Well, I'm blessed!" muttered Colville, or to be candid, he used the subaltern's variant of the phrase.

"You soon will be if you don't do as I tell you," came the emphatic assurance. "But before I go, for I must give the people at Ibi a chance — though it is

a thousand to one I shall be too late — who is the lady your friend inquired about?"

Colville wanted to say so much that he found but few words. He could only gasp:

"My dear Warden — didn't you hear?"

"I heard her name, of course, but it cannot be a lady of the same name in whom I was once interested. Still, it is an odd thing it should be mentioned to-night, and in this place. Who is she?"

"Oh, d——n it all!" groaned Colville, "how could any poor devil guess he was in for this sort of stew when he started from Ibi yesterday!"

"I assure you we are wasting precious time, Jimmie. Perhaps it is my fault, but the question was a natural one under the circumstances. Tell your men it is all right, or they may want to prevent my departure; they understand those drums, you know. My only hope of success in case I am stopped at the bend is to keep up the pretense that I am a special envoy from the emirs in the interior. Some day, if we win through this business, I shall have a fine yarn for you. Good-by!"

"But look here, old chap, I can't let you slip away like that. Confound it! I don't know what to say, but the plain truth is best, perhaps. The girl you were engaged to, Miss Evelyn Dane, is inside the mission-house now, this minute, and the man I brought from Ibi is the Earl of Fairholme. He told me all about you on the way up. He's a decent sort, and he is wild over Miss Dane. But it is only fair to add ——-"

A series of blood-curdling yells and a volley of musketry that lit the bush with spurts of flame put an abrupt end to Colville's qualifying sentence. He was so taken aback by the extraordinary coincidence that Warden should arrive at Kadana almost at the same instant as the man who had come there with the avowed intent of taking Evelyn Dane home to England as his wife, that for one bemused second he failed to grasp the imminence or extent of the native onslaught.

It was otherwise with Warden. Though his brain might well have reeled at the words he had just heard from a brother officer's lips, the incessant watchfulness demanded by the life of the past five months had created in him a second nature. While his heart asked tumultuous questions and found no answer to any of them, his head dictated the steps that must be taken if they were to offer any sort of organized defense.

"Company! Attention!" he shouted. "Four men remain with the launch, keep steam up and shove off from the bank; all others follow to the mission. Double — March! Beni Kalli, run the canoe ashore and come!"

The loud command, proceeding apparently from their leader, though not in their leader's voice, was promptly obeyed by the Hausas. They came running across the clearing, loading their rifles and fixing bayonets as they ran.

"Now, Colville, take hold!" said Warden coolly.

"I'm afraid I startled you out of your wits, but they're your men, not mine."

The younger man needed no second bidding. Glad of the night that hid the scarlet in his face, he told the small squad to surround the mission-house. They would be less visible beneath the veranda than on it. Hume and Fairholme with two women in white dresses had rushed out at the first sound of firing, and they were painfully distinct in the light that came from a large lamp inside the room at the back.

"Shout to them to get inside, close the doors, and extinguish all lights," said Warden, keeping close to Colville during the combined rush to gain the obscurity afforded by the heavy beams that supported the upper story.

Colville obeyed. He was honestly glad that a stronger man had taken control. His knowledge of the country told him that a most serious and far-spread rebellion was in progress. Rifles, not gas-pipe guns, were in the hands of a tribe famed for its fighting qualities. He had a dozen men, not counting the four in the launch, to meet the onset of as many thousands. He did not fear death, for he had faced it many times, but it was one thing to enter on a definite campaign, no matter what the odds, and quite another to find himself plunged into a seemingly hopeless fight in a time of profound peace, and at the close of an exhausting journey undertaken to oblige a sporting British peer.

He had to bellow his instructions twice before the

alarmed occupants of the mission-house quitted the veranda. The sound of his own voice was helpful; it steadied him. It was in his natural tone that he growled to Warden:

"Fairholme admits that he is an ass, rather boasts of it, in fact, but I thought Hume would have more sense than to let the women stand there offering a clear target."

"They are safe enough yet," was the reply. "Their rooms face the river; the attack is coming from the bush."

"Wouldn't it be better to take to the river at once?"

"No, that means certain death. There are three canoes, and each has a Nordenfeldt mounted in its bows."

"Good Lord, man, a Nordenfeldt!"

"Yes, and M'Wanga has a dozen 12-pounders in two batteries at Oku. Not that they will ever be of much use to him. I took care of that. But I failed utterly to get on board the canoes. They were moored in mid-stream, guarded day and night, and the guns were sheeted. Moreover, I have been out of gear nearly six weeks. This is a big business, Colville. How is it no one knew of what was going on?"

"There were rumors, but they died down. Forbes ——"

"Did they send Forbes in my place?"

"Yes."

"That explains it. He is a capital fellow in an

office. To ask him to unravel an Oku plot was to set a bat catching sparrows by daylight."

They had plenty of time to discuss matters thus coolly. No West African fighting-man would demean himself by delivering an assault on an enemy's position without a preliminary hubbub of yells and wild shooting. It is different when he is the defender. Then he will lie close as a partridge till the precise moment that his usually antiquated guns can most effectually belch forth a destroying blast of nails, iron scraps, pebbles, and broken glass and pottery.

But the seconds passed, and the minutes, and no horde of demoniac figures poured across the open compound. The shooting was incessant, yet no bullet struck the house, though not even an indifferent native marksmen could well avoid hitting a big building in which all the living-rooms were on the same floor as the veranda. The lower part of the structure served as a store.

The Hausa soldier-policemen, picked men of the West African Regiment, were trained not to fire without orders. They were far too few in number to line the stockade, which enclosed a space fully two acres in extent. In any case, the defense it afforded was worse than useless. The gates were jammed open by a year's growth of herbage. In some instances, a passage had been made by the simple expedient of removing a whole section. It would demand many hours of labor by a hundred men to put the palisade in a serviceable condition. Hume's effort was to

establish a mission, not a fort, in this jungle outpost.

The Hausa sergeant was puzzled in more ways than one. He heard his officer talking English to an Arab, he heard the unmistakable crackling of rifles fully equal to those with which he and the others were armed, and he was unable to account for the delay in the attack.

Enjoining on his men the necessity of keeping well within the shadow, he crept along close to the wall until he stood by Colville's side. He was about to ask permission to make a reconnaissance, and thus force the enemy to reveal themselves, when an incident almost without precedent in bush warfare took place.

The indiscriminate firing stopped, the wild-beast noises died away into absolute silence, and a strip of white cotton suddenly became visible in one of the many gaps in the stockade. It was held stationary for a moment, then a native warrior stepped boldly forth into the moonlight. His magnificent physique was enhanced by the war trappings that decked his head, breast, and loins, and he strode forward with the lithe movements of a man in perfect training. When he entered the compound, it was seen that he carried a white flag on a lance. He meant to parley, and such a departure from the savage methods of a semi-cannibal tribe was hitherto unheard of. Usually, an unprotected party of Europeans, whether missionaries or traders, are butchered without mercy if found within the zone of tribal foray.

"By gad," muttered Colville, "they're going to offer terms!"

"I think I can guess what the terms will be," said Warden. "There's a woman in the case, Jimmie — something new in a bush campaign, eh?"

The subaltern did not understand the curious undertone of grim irony in the remark; but he was aware of it and made no reply. The black warrior had halted. His wonderfully developed sense of hearing warned him that some one not in the house was speaking, and the voices could come from no other place than the gloomy recess beneath the veranda.

"O Hume!" he cried loudly. "I fit for palaver."

Colville half expected that Warden would answer for Hume. He was mistaken. His senior leaned back against the wall of the store, and folded his arms with the air of a man who meant to abide by a settlement in whose discussion he can take no part.

The negro, though trusting to his vague conception of a code of honor that he associated with fighting against white men, came no nearer.

"O Hume!" he cried again, "open dem door one-time, an' hear what I fit for say."

In the strange hush succeeding the frenzied uproar that announced the presence of a host of armed natives, the envoy's words were clearly audible to the five people in the upper rooms. Hume came out, followed by Bambuk.

"Who are you and what do you want?" said the

missionary. "Why do you come to me at night, and threaten the lives of my friends and myself in this manner?"

"I done tell you if Bambuk lib. I no fit for long palaver."

At this, the interpreter leaned over the rail of the veranda.

"You are Loanda, I think?" he said, using the vernacular.

"Yes." was the reply. "Tell the white man that the lives of himself and his wife will be spared, and they will be taken in safety to the frontier, if the English girl now in their house is handed over to us at once. She, too, will be well treated. One whom she knows, Miguel Figuero, awaits her at Oku. He is our friend, so she need have no fear. I, Loanda, say it, and that which I say is done."

Bambuk translated this astounding request literally. Evelyn heard every word, and she alone grasped their terrible import. She appeared in the doorway, white-faced, with eyes that terror had made almost distraught.

"Miguel Figuero!" repeated the bewildered Hume. "Isn't that the name of the Portuguese rascal you have told us of, Miss Dane?"

"Yes," she said, and her voice was tense with the effort to keep it from breaking. "He is in league with the men of Oku. I knew it, and Captain Warden warned the authorities at home about him, but no one here would listen. Oh, Mr. Hume, it is a dreadful

thing to say, but rather than fall into that man's power I would kill myself."

"You surely don't imagine that we would agree to those terms, do you?"

Hume was almost indignant, but Evelyn flung herself on her knees and lifted her clasped hands in agony to the star-studded sky.

"What else can I do?" she wailed. "My life is broken. I have nothing left to live for. If I refuse this offer of peace, it means that all your lives are forfeit — yours and your wife's, and Lord Fairholme's, and those of the officer and men who came here in the launch from Ibi. Tell him I agree. I will go to this man. But make the chief promise to spare you and the others. I must know first that you are safe. Then — O God, pardon me! — then — I ——"

"My dear girl — which of us would purchase a few more hours of life at such a price?"

"But you do not understand," she blazed forth. "If the death of one can save many why shouldn't the one die? We can't hope to resist these men; there are thousands of them. And unless I fall by my own hand, they may capture me unharmed after you have given your lives uselessly in my defense. Oh, pity me and pray for me, but do not let me be responsible for the slaughter of the few friends I possess in the world!"

She could no longer restrain her tears. The dark blue dome that typified the heaven to which she looked for mercy was blotted out of sight. She cowered as though from a blow, and wept pitifully. Then a voice

rang out from the compound directly in front of where she knelt. As the opening syllables reached her ears, though she understood no word that was uttered, her surcharged brain harbored a new dread, for the man who was speaking spoke in Warden's voice — Warden, whom she had learned to regard as dead these months past. Of course, grief and fear had driven her mad! She swept away the tears that blurred her vision, and peered through the rails of the veranda, but she saw only a cloaked Arab who had stepped forth into the moonlight, and was now addressing stern warnings to the amazed Loanda. And fantasy played her distracted senses another strange trick. The face of the native chief was plainly visible. She watched its expression change from sheer wonderment to baffled rage, and it seemed to her that it was not Loanda who glowered at the Arab who harangued him, but the scowling mask carved on the gourd by Domenico Garcia.

Oh, yes, she was truly mad. She realized it herself, but the others would never suspect it. Then the persistence of the notion brought relief to her aching heart. A kindly delirium might carry her through the ordeal that lay before her. She no longer feared insanity, rather did she welcome it, and now was her chance to act while she was brave and would not flinch from that which she conceived was her duty.

But why was that tall Arab still talking in Warden's voice, and why did the stalwart savage seem to threaten him with furious gesture? Even while she was gazing

between the wooden bars of the railing, she saw Loanda grasp his spear menacingly, whereupon the Arab laughed — how like it was to Warden's laugh of good-natured raillery! — and a couple of Hausa soldiers appeared, with rifles held suggestively, as men hold shotguns when they expect a rabbit to scuttle out of a spinney.

Again, being still under the spell of that sudden lunacy, she heard the Arab say in English, and more amazingly than ever in Warden's very tones:

"Now, Jimmie! Four paces to the front in open order — every man — quick!"

An English officer and several soldiers came out into the open. After one glance of sheer astonishment, the Oku chief turned and stalked away towards the bush. He did not deign to hurry, but his lithe springy gait soon carried him into the somber shadows. The dramatic silence that followed was broken by the man in an officer's uniform.

"By gad, Warden, you did that splendidly," he said. "I should never have thought of it. Do you think it will work?"

"For to-night, perhaps. One never knows just how the native mind will look at a thing. It gave Loanda a positive shock when he was really convinced that a British officer was not only present at most of M'Wanga's war palavers, but had thrown out of gear every field gun in his precious battery. He would not tell me where M'Wanga is now, but I hardly think they will attack us in earnest before consulting him."

"I am inclined to believe you have knocked the bottom out of the whole bally business," said Colville jubilantly. "They are scared to death of you, Warden. You are the first man who had the opportunity to bust up the Oku ju-ju, and, by Jove, didn't you take it?"

But Colville was wrong. The weird hoot of an owl came from the bush, a drum tapped out a signal, and instantly the forest became alive with vivid jets of light. The negroes had begun their fusillade again, and this time they meant to kill, not to frighten. Bullets whistled past the house, imbedded themselves in the stout timbers, tore huge splinters from beams, and hurled shingles from the roof. It seemed to be a miracle that every person in or near the building was not struck instantly, but the opening volley sent the Hausas to cover beneath the veranda, where they were told to lie flat on the ground behind the protecting supports. To reply to the enemy's fire would be merely a waste of precious ammunition, and the men carried only a small quantity in their bandoliers. The time to fire was when every shot would be effective. Rarely will untrained savages press home an attack when their foremost warriors fall. The Hausas, negroes themselves, had been taught this in many a bush skirmish, and they had absolute confidence in their white leaders, for, by this time, the rumor had gone round that the man in Arab clothing was the well-known deputy commissioner of the Brass River, under whom some of them had fought in the sister protectorate.

Hume, who was cool as any soldier, seized Evelyn's arm the instant that the first bullet crashed into the wood-work. Fairholme, too, who had recovered from the stupefying suddenness of what was, to him, a wholly unexpected sequel to a wearisome trip up a fever-laden river, ran forward to help, and the two men half carried the girl to the protection of the house.

But she had no thought of danger. Though it was dark inside the main living-room, she held them fast when they would have released her, and tried to read their very souls by a look.

"Did you hear?" she gasped. "That man — the Arab — who is he? . . . The other called him Warden . . . Why should he do that? . . . Was it not cruel of him? . . . And why, why, did it seem to me that I heard Arthur's voice?"

"Calm yourself, Miss Dane," said the missionary quietly. "Providence at times adopts means not within mortal ken. I could not follow what was said to Loanda, but Bambuk tells me that, by some astounding chance, Captain Arthur Warden has not only crossed a large part of Africa, but has lived many weeks in Oku itself, and is now taking measures which will, I trust, by God's mercy, secure our safety."

A queer choking cry came from the girl's parched throat.

"Then I am not mad?" she murmured. "He is really there! And he heard what I said — when — when I offered to go to Figuero?"

"Yes, of course he heard. It seemed to me it was

on your account that he made himself known to the chief. But I do not yet understand exactly what happened. I only know that when first he spoke to Colville he used Arabic."

"Yes, by gad," put in Fairholme, finding an opening at last. "I thought he was a beastly native, an' I cut in like a bloomin' ass. Just my usual luck, Evelyn. The favorite got up in the last stride an' pipped the outsider by a short head, eh, what?"

The earl's happy-go-lucky method of expressing himself was singularly out of tune with his surroundings. Hume had closed the door, and the windows were already shuttered, so the darkness was now that of Pharaoh's Egypt when Moses stretched forth his hand towards heaven. From without came the incessant crackling of musketry, and the maniacal howlings of negroes inspiring each other for the ultimate hand-to-hand fight; within, one heard the hysterical sobbing of Mrs. Hume, the mutterings of the Foulah servant, and the patter of small débris from walls and roof as the building shook under the sledge-hammer blows of bullets traveling at a high velocity. Luckily, as Warden had pointed out, the front of the mission-house faced the river, and there was no firing from that quarter as yet. The veranda was approached by a double staircase which mounted from each side and met at a small landing, whence half a dozen steps led to the level of the upper floor. As both sections of the stairs projected beyond the line of the building, their comparatively thin boards were being constantly

ripped and split by the leaden missiles that hurtled in from both flanks.

It was spinning a coin with death for any one to descend either to right or left, yet that is what Evelyn did when Lord Fairholme's bizarre explanation brought her back to the world which she had already quitted in imagination. Owing to the tomb-like blackness of the room, neither man was aware of her intent until the door was opened and she was speeding down the shattered stairs.

In her white dress she was a most conspicuous object. A pent-house roof shielded the stairs from sun and rain, but the moment she emerged into the moonlit compound she resembled some ethereal creature sent by the gods to still the wretched strife waged by foolish men. And, spirit-like, she passed unscathed through the hissing and biting rain of lead. She had but one thought, and it fluttered tremulously from her lips.

"Arthur!" she wailed, "Arthur! I am here!"

And again, "Arthur! Come to me! Why don't you speak? . . . It is I, Evelyn . . . Where are you? Oh, Arthur dear, answer me."

Warden was lying by Colville's side behind a main pillar at an angle of the house when he heard the girl's rapt cry. Turning on an elbow, he saw her flitting past. He was up in an instant. Without spoken word he leaped out and clasped her in his arms.

Colville rose too.

"Oh, good Lord!" he muttered, "they will both be killed!"

But fate had chosen for Warden a strange path to a woman's love, and the fickle goddess shielded him now when he, all a-quiver with the thrill of holding Evelyn in his arms, clasped her tightly and ran with her up the rickety stairs. Even as he hurried to place her in shelter the bushmen had seen the white-robed apparition and concentrated their fire in that direction. Bullets spat against the ground, crashed through the flimsy wooden structure, and pierced their clothing many times — but neither was injured. A few seconds after she had passed through the door Evelyn was carried back again. But it was a fitting outcome of the madness that had fallen on the quiet mission-station that she should be blithely heedless of the mortal peril which both she and her lover had escaped. Even while death was missing them by a hair's breadth, she began to tell Warden in broken phrases how she had never faltered in her belief that he would one day be restored to her, and that she had come to Africa and the Benuë strong in the conviction that they would meet there and nowhere else in the wide world.

All of this, and more, was delightfully inaccurate, but Evelyn believed it and the man who listened believed it, and love was more potent than cold reason, so cold reason was barred out among the shrieking hail of lead that had failed to secure its victims.

Yet their idyll was soon cut short. A red glare became visible through the chinks of door and windows, and Warden knew what it meant.

"They have set fire to the native huts," he said.

"They want to see where our men are stationed before they try a rush. I must go, sweetheart. Kiss me! If it is good-by, I shall die content, for I have passed through much tribulation ere this divine moment was vouchsafed."

Not for all the gold in Africa would she prove herself unworthy of him in that supreme moment.

"Go, then!" she said. "Whether in life or death we shall not be separated again."

Warden was at the door when some one sprang after him. In the growing light of the burning buildings he recognized Colville's companion in the launch.

"I suppose I can count for one in the scrum," said the stranger. "Evelyn promised to be my sister, old chap, an' before we all go under I'll d——n well down a nigger or two for the sake of the family. Can you spare a gun? I'm a good man at driven birds, an' these black jokers are several sizes bigger than blackcock — eh, what?"

CHAPTER XVI

A FIVE MINUTES' FIGHT

Fairholme was soon equipped with a rifle. He was crouching behind a wooden pillar close to Warden and Colville, when a Hausa who had incautiously exposed himself uttered a queer cough and pitched forward on his face, shot through the lungs. The earl took the man's gun and bandolier, but noticed that none of the others were firing, though a number of black forms were dimly visible through the murk created by the smoke of the blazing huts.

Warden was watching him.

"You will soon get busy," he said. "They are preparing for a rush. Pick out the leaders, the fellows wearing the gaudiest feathers, or carrying a leopard-skin slung across their shoulders."

"You're a funny lookin' bird yourself," chuckled Fairholme. "What price you for the Kingdom Come stakes when the niggers spot you? Every black son of a gun will want to add you to the bag."

"That's right, Warden," put in Colville anxiously. "Chuck away that burnous, and stick on poor Toomba's cap. Fairholme can pull it in with the clearing-rod."

"No," said Warden. "My Arab's livery has served me in good stead thus far. I shall not abandon it until I can borrow the togs of civilization, if ever I need them. Hello, here they come!"

A slackening in the fusillade and a terrific outburst of yells showed that the enemy were breaking cover in force. In an instant the compound seemed to become alive with armed negroes, many of whom had already discarded their modern rifles for the more familiar matchet and spear.

Colville shouted something in the Hausa tongue, and his men, all but two, leaped to their feet. Firing with deadly accuracy at such a short range, they brought down a score of the foremost savages. Fairholme, imbued with the traditions of European warfare, naturally expected that the attack would be pressed home, so he set his teeth and resolved to enter the next world with a royal bodyguard. Remembering Warden's instructions, he looked only for the most gorgeously decorated warriors, and found three including Loanda himself. Warden, who had secured the rifle of the second wounded Hausa, saw the earl bowl over a ju-ju man at sixty yards, no mean shooting at night in an atmosphere rapidly becoming smoke-laden.

"Well done, brother-in-law!" he cried, and in the throes of that deadly strife those two began a friendship not to be severed on this side of the great boundary. As the house was attacked simultaneously on three sides, Colville ran around it to tell each member of his tiny force to fall back on the staircase when hard

pressed. The instruction was given not a second too soon. Trusting to their great numbers, the men of Oku came on boldly. They were first-rate soldiers in their own way, they anticipated an easy victory, and they were filled with the frenzied desire to use steel rather than lead. That is the bushman's temperament; killing loses half its ferocious joy if he cannot "paint" his weapon. This sheer lust of blood now served the little garrison in good stead. True, it exposed them to the combined onslaught of hundreds of sinewy negroes, but it saved them from the speedy extermination that must have been their lot were their assailants content to shoot them down at close quarters. In less than a minute after the stockade was passed by the enemy, Warden, Colville, Fairholme, Beni Kalli — who used an adze he stumbled across in the doorway of the store — the Hausa sergeant, and seven of the rank and file — twelve men all told — were in a half circle around the foot of the stairs, plying rifle and bayonet on a wall of black humanity. The very strength of the attacking force placed it at a disadvantage. The men in front were hindered by those who surged up in ever-increasing waves from the rear. Every shot fired by the defenders effected losses out of all proportion to the general run of wounds inflicted by musketry even in a hand-to-hand engagement. Though the wretched warriors who bore the brunt of the assault might have escaped bullet or butt or bayonet thrust, there was no dodging the withering blasts of powder which blinded and scorched them,

and smote their naked limbs with strange buffets. The eerie yells of those who thought the mission had already fallen mingled with the screams of the wounded and the groans of the dying. The place reeked like a slaughter-house, and the corpses of those who were killed outright, or the maimed and writhing men who had sustained injuries which rendered them incapable of crawling out of that packed space, formed a veritable rampart around the defenders.

At this stage the loss of a skilled leader like Loanda made itself felt among his followers. He would either have set fire to the unprotected rear of the building or drawn off a part of his force and renewed the shooting from a flank. Any such diversion by a tithe of the warriors engaged would render the position immediately untenable by the three white men and the Hausas. When, at last, the flanking maneuver was attempted by half a dozen negroes who had extricated themselves unharmed from the press beneath the overhanging roof of the stairs, the disastrous effect of their strategy showed what might have been accomplished but for the smallness of their number. Colville fell, and the Hausa sergeant, and two men. A bullet plowed through Warden's hair, and another ripped Fairholme's coat and shirt, and grazed his breast, and these casualties resulted before the few men attempting the enfilade had fired two rounds per rifle.

Warden, alive to a danger that promised instant collapse, slung Colville across his shoulder and gave the order that the few who remained alive should fall

back, still fighting steadily, until they had mounted the double stairs and gained the veranda.

There was no doubt in his mind that the end had come. His surprise had failed. He had hoped that the unexpected presence of the Hausas and a party of white people might damp the ardor of the men of Oku, who had looked forward to securing an easy prey in the mission, and who could not possibly have anticipated a stubborn resistance by troops whom they had learned to fear. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred his belief would have been justified. That there was an exception now arose from the fact that the tribal witch-doctors had made much of the modern arms which the tribesmen possessed.

"You have the white man's fetish," they declared. "Hitherto our ju-ju has not prevailed against them. To-day you are invulnerable."

Under European leaders this mistaken logic would not have caused a reversion to the method of combined attack so dear to the native warrior. Loanda and some of his lieutenants had already displayed their shrewdness by harping constantly on the necessity of depending more on the rifle and less on spear or matchet. They would never have permitted an advance in force if they were not certain of their ability to overpower the weak detachment of Hausas at the first rush. In a sense, it was Evelyn's presence which brought about this decision. Their Portuguese ally had made such a point of her capture uninjured that they wished to gratify him, while there were other forcible reasons

There was no doubt in his mind that the end had come

Page 304

why they should not waste too many hours on the siege of a paltry place like the mission station.

Though the struggle thus far was short and sharp, the unhappy people within the walls were only too conscious of its developments. To their strained senses it seemed that at any moment the door must be burst open and they swept into the clutches of merciless savages. They could not tell who was living or dead. The incessant shooting and the howls and agonized cries of the negroes drowned all other sounds. Evelyn thought she heard Warden addressing some order to the Hausas, but she could not be sure. Hume, in whom the man was rapidly supplanting the missioner, wished to take a personal share in the defense, but his wife clung to him in an agony of terror, and implored him not to leave her. While trying to soothe the distracted woman he reflected that he would probably prove more of a hindrance than otherwise in the fighting line. If he used a gun at all it must be as a cudgel, for he did not even understand the mechanism of the breech-block.

Bambuk, though a Mohammedan and a Foulah, was no longer a fighting man. He had waxed fat and prosperous, and he waited now for death with the fatalism he had displayed ever since he knew for certain that the men of Oku were bent on looting Kadana.

Evelyn, leaning against the door, with every faculty on the alert for the slightest indication of Warden's welfare, nevertheless let her mind stray in the most bewildering manner. She was devoid of fear. If

given her choice, she would be out there in the thick of the struggle, using her puny strength on behalf of the man she loved. Instead, she was condemned to inaction. The intolerable darkness became oppressive, and her memory flew back through time and space to the sunlit day when she sat with Warden and Peter Evans in the little dinghy of the *Nancy*, and saw the grim face of the Oku chief dancing about on the blue waters of the Solent.

What a trivial incident it was in some respects — yet what a mighty upheaval it portended! No matter in what direction her whirling thoughts took her, the carved calabash seemed to be mixed up with events in a way that was hardly credible. It brought her and Warden together. That chance meeting on a summer morning gave them a bond of interest which quickly strengthened into affection and love. Then it led them into the intricacies of a political plot, sent Warden to London, caused him to encounter Mrs. Laing, with all the heartache and misery that resulted therefrom, and cast him ashore at Rabat to become a slave and a desert wanderer. She herself had been equally its sport. Her knowledge of the men of Oku alone induced Figuero and Baumgartner to conspire against her. If she had never seen the gourd it was more than probable that she would never have gazed on the Benuë River. And how persistently that weird creation of Domenico Garcia's skill had clung to either Warden or herself. It was not to be shaken off. Even now, when they were on the very threshold of death,

it was lying there in her room, shrouded in a canvas case. She could almost see its evil scowl everlastingly threatening mankind.

Though a fresh outburst of firing startled her highly strung nerves she felt somewhat of a thrill of supernatural awe at the fancy that the carved image of the by-gone King of Benin had forced its way back to the actual locality in which its human prototype had ruled millions of those very men who were now clamoring for the lives of herself and her companions.

It was a strange notion, and it dominated her for a moment to the exclusion of all else. Could it be possible that there were subtle forces at work of whose existence she was wholly unaware? Had these unhappy blacks some power at command which was denied to those who lorded it over them? Of late she had read a good deal concerning the supposed origin of Obi rites in West African fetish-worship. She had never seen a real ju-ju man until that afternoon, but his appearance and antics were sufficiently striking to create a vivid impression quite apart from the tragic sequel to his incantation. The queer belief that the calabash was in some degree responsible for the bloodshed going on within a few feet of where she stood so took hold of her that she found the continued darkness unbearable.

"Mr. Hume," she said, forcing her parched lips to utter the words, "don't you think the lamp might be lit now? It cannot make much difference. We are nearing the end."

For reply Hume struck a match, and applied it to the wick. The comfortable and spacious room suddenly assumed its familiar guise. It looked quiet and home-like. The turmoil raging beneath seemed to be absurdly incongruous — a horrible dream rather than a dread reality.

Yet the lamp was hardly well alight ere Warden's voice came from the veranda.

"Open the door, Hume!" he cried. "Colville is wounded!"

Evelyn, owing to her nearness, flung wide the door before the missionary could reach it. Warden stood there, ghastly to behold, but still apparently free from any grave injury. His left arm encircled Colville's limp body, and in his right hand was a gun-barrel from which the stock had been broken off. In his Arab costume, travel-soiled and blood-stained, he looked the incarnation of fearsome war, while the seemingly lifeless form he carried added a note of horror to his appalling aspect.

But when he saw Evelyn he actually smiled. She caught the tender look in his eyes through the mask of blood and dirt and perspiration.

"I fear it is all up with us, sweetheart," he said. "I don't think Colville is dead, but it is only a matter of seconds for him and the rest of us. Have you a revolver? Give me that lamp. It may help a little. Under this low roof we cannot distinguish friend from foe."

He spoke so gently, with such well-balanced modu-

lation, that he might have been standing at the door of some peaceful villa overlooking the Thames, with no more serious purport in his words than to light the way for a guest. But a rush and a furious mêlée on the stairs showed what manner of guest might be expected, and that ominous question anent a revolver was not lost on Evelyn. Hume took Colville into his arms, and Warden, without waiting for the lamp, turned to reinforce the five men who now held the enemy at bay.

The girl, with a Berserk courage worthy of her ancestry, snatched up the lamp and ran with it to the veranda. Attached to a pillar at the head of the stairs was a bracket on which a light was placed each night in the rainy season to attract the insects that would otherwise invade the house. She put the lamp there, and stole one awestricken glance at the furious conflict raging on both sides of the lower landing. A bullet, fired from a muzzle-loader, sang past her face. She almost wished that a truer aim had found heart or brain, because then she would be spared the affrighting alternative suggested by Warden. If she did not die by her own hand, would the men of Oku kill her? She feared they would not!

For an instant the rays of the lamp enabled the defense to beat back the first surge of what must surely be the final and successful assault. A gigantic native, whom she did not know — but who was swinging an adze in fine style by Warden's side, turned and gazed at her. It was Beni Kalli, Warden's negro companion

in the escape from Lektawa, and now his most devoted henchman. He had seldom seen a white woman, and never one in any way resembling Evelyn. To his untutored mind, she was a spirit.

"Now, may Allah be praised!" he cried joyfully, "we shall whip these dogs of pagans back to their swamp, for mine eyes have seen one of the lily maids who tend the Prophet's flock in Paradise."

Warden, who thought his gigantic retainer had gone fey, looked around and found that Evelyn was immediately behind him, though on a slightly higher level. She was standing in a most perilous position. There was a space of at least three feet between the lower edge of the main roof and the slight scantling that protected the staircase from the tremendous rainstorms of the tropics, and any one standing a little way back from the house could not fail to see her. He forgot the heartbroken advice he had just given her. He realized only that the woman he loved was in mortal peril.

"Go back!" he shouted. "For God's sake, go in and bolt the door! You will be shot from the compound!"

A negro leaped round the corner of the stairs and struck at him with a matchet. Beni Kalli was just in time to parry the blow. Then the adze whirled, and buried itself in the man's skull. Before it could be withdrawn a spear darted up viciously, but Warden's broken rifle diverted the thrust and a Hausa got his bayonet home. Nevertheless, a dozen more negroes

were forcing their way up on both sides. Fairholme, valiant little aristocrat, was borne down and fell, utterly exhausted, at Evelyn's feet. A Hausa was shot through the head and dropped across Fairholme's body. Three men, Warden, Beni Kalli, and a Hausa, now alone held at bay the human wolves who saw victory within their grasp.

Evelyn refused to re-enter the house. She meant to die there by her lover's side. Why did not merciful death come quickly? It would be better if she passed before him. She breathed a prayer that God would vouchsafe this grace, for her woman's heart revolted from the thought that she should see him killed. In a very trance of hope that her wish might be granted, she looked into the moonlit compound and stretched out her arms pitifully, for she well knew that while Warden lived no kindly spear or native sword would free her soul for that eternal meeting.

But the men of Oku were running, running for their lives and throwing away their cherished rifles, lest they should not be able to run fast enough. Through the drifting smoke of the burning huts and the haze now spreading up the bank from the river, she saw little squads of dark-clothed Hausas rushing in pursuit of the flying blacks. Greatest marvel of all, scattered among the Hausas were a number of British sailors. There was no mistaking their uniforms or the exceeding zest with which they entered into the last phase of a first-rate fight.

When the wondrous fact that succor was at hand

penetrated the ecstasy of that mute appeal to death, she did not cry it aloud to Warden. Not only would she imperil both him and his two companions by distracting their attention from the cut-and-thrust combat on the stairs, but, sad to relate of a tender-hearted girl, she found a delirious satisfaction in watching the sweep of gun-barrel and adze and the wicked plunging of the Hausa bayonet. Why should not these ravening beasts be punished? What harm had she or any one in the mission done them that they should howl so frantically for their blood?

But she prayed — oh, how she prayed! — that the relieving force would hurry. She could not tell that officers and men of the white contingent were astounded by the spectacle of a slight, girlish figure, robed in muslin and seemingly in no fear of her life, standing under the bright rays of a lamp on the veranda of the beleaguered mission-house. It did not occur to her that they would see her; and, simply because she was there, they by no means expected to find a desperate fight being waged in the narrow space of the staircase. But they soon woke up to the facts when the foremost man came near enough to discover the black figures wedged in both gangways.

"Come on!" he yelled. "This is what we're looking for!"

"No shooting, boys!" roared a jubilant naval lieutenant. "Bayonets only! Dig 'em out!"

And dug out they were, in a manner not prescribed by the drill book, until the passages were clear, and

the newcomers were marveling at the way in which the mission-house was held, and Warden was free to lay aside that useful gun-barrel and stoop to lift the dead Hausa off Fairholme's almost breathless body.

The officer, who was first up the stairs, looked round for some one in authority. He saw an Arab and a girl supporting a white man between them. To his profound amazement, he heard the Arab say:

"He is all right, dear. Those cuts are superficial, just like my own. But he is thoroughly spent. I am almost at the end of my own tether, though I was hard as nails till that wretched fever bowled me over in Oku."

"But, Arthur darling," he was even more astounded at hearing from the girl's lips, "where have the troops come from? What special decree of Providence brought them to our rescue?"

"Here is some one who can tell us?" said Warden, looking at the lieutenant, while he placed Fairholme on a chair in the living-room.

"May I ask who you are?" demanded the sailor, finding his tongue but slowly.

"My name is Warden, Captain Arthur Warden, of the Southern Nigeria Protectorate — and yours?"

"Warden! Are you in earnest?"

"Never more so. Won't you follow my example?"

"Oh, I'm Bellairs, of the *Valiant*."

"Did Captain Mortimer send you?" cried Evelyn, who was mightily afraid that the moment she spoke she would burst into tears.

"Well — yes. You are Miss Dane, I suppose? And this is Lord Fairholme. Is poor Colville gone?"

"Not very far," said a weak voice from an inner room. "My collar-bone is broken and I've lost chips off several sections, but I'll be able to shove along with my arm in a sling."

"Has anybody got any liquor?" murmured another weak voice from a chair. "I don't care what it is — even water. I've got a thirst I wouldn't sell for a pony."

Hume, who had fallen on his knees when he heard the strange voices, and looked out to find that the battle was ended, rose and went to a cupboard.

"I have here two quarts of champagne which I meant to keep for cases of serious illness," he said. "I don't think any of us will ever be so near death again until the scythe-bearer comes and will not be denied, so if any of you gentlemen are expert at opening these bottles ——"

Fairholme recovered instantly.

"Hand one here," he gasped. "I'm a double blue at drawin' corks and emptyin' a bottle of bubbly."

Hume, who had lighted a second lamp, produced some glasses. Then he glanced at a clock.

"Can it be possible that all this dreadful business has lasted only four minutes?" he asked.

"Four minutes!" cried the sailor. "Why, we heard firing in this direction nearly twenty minutes ago!"

"That was the first round, when the blacks tried to frighten us into submission," said Warden. "But,

now that I come to think of it, the scrap itself cannot have occupied many seconds more than your estimate, Hume."

"Do you mean to tell me that you five accounted for that heap of ——"

He stopped and looked at Evelyn and Mrs. Hume. The latter was striving to dry her eyes while she sipped some of the wine. Poor lady! She was not cast in the heroic mold, nor had she ever pretended to be.

"There were more than five of us," explained Warden sadly. "Eleven of Colville's Hausas are down."

"Some of them can only be wounded," said Evelyn. "Let us go and attend to them."

"Better not, Miss Dane," interposed the sailor hastily. He had seen things in the compound which rendered it advisable for the women to remain indoors until the river crocodiles had claimed their tribute. "I will tell some of my men to look after them," he explained, "and our surgeon will soon be here. Just now he is busy on board the launches."

"What? Have you been engaged, too?" asked Warden.

"By Jove, we dropped in for the biggest surprise I ever heard of. Just fancy being blazed at with Nordenfeldts by niggers! Luckily for us, we came on them unawares, and two of the canoes were headed up-stream. The row that was going on here stopped them from hearing the engines, or I must candidly confess that if they had been ready for us they might

have sunk the flotilla before we came within striking distance. As it was, they got in a few rounds that raked a couple of boats fore and aft, before we got busy with a Gatling. I suppose you didn't catch the racket on account of the dust up here."

"But why in the name of wonder, are you here at all?" demanded Warden.

"Well, my ship reported that a yacht called the *Sans Souci* had landed a lot of arms and ammunition in a creek in neighboring territories. That made the authorities think a bit. But one of your fellows who accompanied us told me that the real scare came when a Mrs. Laing — she knows you, Warden, and she had been living some weeks at Lokoja — was seized with blackwater fever. She was pretty bad, so she sent for the Commissioner to put her affairs in order. Among other things, she warned him that some Portuguese scoundrel was undoubtedly planning a rising at Oku, and indeed all along the line of the Benuë and right through Southern Nigeria. There had been some rather curious ju-ju performances recently in a few of the seaboard districts, so it was decided to send a strong column up the Benuë to investigate matters. We dropped detachments of Hausas at every station we passed, and had intended halting some miles below here to-night, when we heard the drums going in the bush. Your Hausa man — Hudson his name is — urged us to push on this far. Jolly good job we did."

"Has Mrs. Laing recovered?" asked Evelyn fear-

fully. The sailor hesitated a moment. He seemed to leave something unsaid.

"Oh, no. She went under in a day. Sad thing. I have never met her. An awfully nice woman, Hudson says."

"I am sorry," sobbed Evelyn. "She was too young to die, and she has not had much happiness in her life."

"Let there be no more talk of death — I am weary of it," said Warden cheerily, and he broke off into Arabic.

"What sayest thou, Beni Kalli? Hast seen enough of the black camel since we left Lektawa together?"

"Verily, Seyyid," grinned the native. "I thought you and I should mount him in company to-night."

"Can you do me the exceeding favor of lending me a suit of clothes?" said Warden, seeing that Bellairs was about his own height.

"Certainly. Come down to my launch. We ought to hold a council of war, I think. By the way, I suppose the ladies will not stir out of this room till your return."

"No," said Evelyn promptly. "We shall prepare supper, but if you keep Captain Warden more than half an hour I shall come for him."

"You must remain here, sweetheart," said the grim-looking Arab. "There is a lot to be done outside. Be sure I shall join you without delay. Come along, Bellairs, and rummage your kit — there's a good chap."

As they crossed the compound together, the sailor appeared to make up his mind to discharge a disagreeable duty.

"By the way," he said, "I hope I am not mixing matters absurdly, but are you the Warden that Mrs. Laing was once engaged to?"

"Yes — more than ten years ago. What of it?"

"Well, she has left you everything she possessed — a regular pile, somebody told me."

"On condition that I do not marry Evelyn Dane, I suppose?" said Warden, who treated the sailor's astonishing announcement as though the receipt of a thumping legacy were an every-day affair.

"I haven't heard anything of a fly in the amber," said Bellairs. "Hudson knows all about it — he will be able to tell you."

But Warden had no word to say to Hudson concerning Rosamund Laing or her bequest. His mind was too full of the greater wonder that Evelyn and he should meet on the Benuë; that it had fallen to him to snatch her from the clutches of the men of Oku.

CHAPTER XVII

THE SETTLEMENT

When Warden found that the expedition consisted of a hundred sailors and over three hundred Hausas, he was anxious that an advance should be made on Oku at once. The town lay in a bush clearing on high land overlooking the Benuë, not many miles distant from the mission station. He argued that he and Beni Kalli could guide the troops by the bush paths, and that an attack carried out at dawn would demoralize an enemy already shaken by an unforeseen repulse at Kadana.

Every one admitted that he was right from the military point of view; but Hudson, the political officer accompanying the column, shirked the responsibility of taking a step that implied the existence of a tribal war. He argued that while they were fully justified in driving off the assailants of the mission and in demanding the punishment of those engaged in it, together with the fullest compensation for loss of life and property, yet they had no proof that the King of Oku sanctioned the raid.

"When he refuses our terms," he said, "we shall destroy his town and depose him if he escapes with

his life. Under the circumstances, I cannot sanction a forward movement until negotiations have failed."

Bellairs, of course, had to take his orders from the administration, and Warden had no power to override the man whom the Government had deputed to visit Oku. He knew that Loanda, second only in importance to M'Wanga, was among the slain. He had seen M'Wanga himself exercising his savage warriors day after day and taking care that they were taught how to handle the modern weapons to which they were unaccustomed. He was aware of the exact date named for the rising, and was prevented only by several weeks' delirium of fever from stealing off down stream in good time to warn the authorities. But he was not in his own territory, for the Benuë runs through Northern Nigeria while he was attached to the Southern Protectorate, and, above all, he was a soldier, to whom obedience was the first duty. So he refrained from weakening Hudson's position by demonstrating how mistaken was the decision arrived at. He even hoped that, in some mysterious way, matters might be adjusted without further slaughter.

The proper course to adopt was to strike hard and promptly. Failing that, he trusted to the strange workings of the native mind to bring about a peaceful settlement. Though strong in spirit he was broken in body. He had done in five months that which a few men had taken years to accomplish, while the majority of those who essayed the task had failed, and paid the penalty of failure by dying.

When the officers of the expedition gathered in the mission that night and listened to his story, their minds went back to the days of Mungo Park, and Clapperton, and Lander, and Barth, and the rest of the famous band of explorers who had traversed the wilds of the West African hinterland during the close of the eighteenth and the early years of the nineteenth centuries.

Nothing to equal Warden's journey had been done of recent years. It stood alone, a record of almost unexampled fortitude and endurance.

He would never have reached the upper waters of the Niger were it not for the blue cotton wrap taken from the Prophet of El Hamra when that unamiable person was left bound and gagged at Lektawa. So deeply had the Blue Man's repute penetrated into the desert that among Mohammedan tribes the mere sight of his robe was more powerful than an armed escort. In a hasty search through the Prophet's apartment, Warden found his own revolver, two Remington repeating rifles with a supply of cartridges, and a stock of gold dust in quills, the most portable form of desert currency. The blue rag supplied moral, the arms and gold material aid, but the tremendous journey still remained an undertaking fraught with every possible danger. Not until the small party reached Timbuktu could they regard themselves as possessing even a moderate chance of ultimate success. In that city Beni Kalli left his daughter with relatives. No consideration would part him from the Seyyid. Here

was a master worth serving, one who never thought only of himself, but who was ready at any moment to risk life or limb in aid of those who were faithful to his interests. Moreover, he showed rare sport, and Beni Kalli was a born adventurer.

So the pair came down the Niger, and, when Warden learned that matters were quiet at Oku, he formed the daring plan of preserving his incognito even from the British officials at towns in the more settled regions. He fancied that by maintaining his pose as an Arab firebrand he might venture to enter Oku itself. He had spoken nothing but Arabic during so many months that he was now far more glib in the language than many genuine Arabs who could not boast his experience of diverse tribes and varying dialects. He deemed it best to let none know of his scheme. The slightest hint that he had crossed the Sahara would quickly find its way to Oku, and it was his safeguard throughout that the Mahdi of the Atlas had sent him to carry the fiery torch of Islam to the remotest strongholds of the faith. Oku was frankly pagan, its people cannibals when occasion served, but between them and far-off Morocco lay the strong link of hatred of the white man's rule.

Evelyn listened in silence while her lover discoursed. Her eyes shone and her lips were parted. More than once, when some deft hint conveyed to her that his thoughts dwelt ever with her, a tender little smile told him that she understood.

Colville, who insisted on joining them when the

surgeon had dressed his injuries — for a ricochetting bullet had torn a jagged wound in his shoulder as well as broken his collar-bone — had heard from Lagos something of the gourd. He asked Warden what had become of it.

"It is among my belongings at Lagos," he said. "At least, I hope so. The skipper of the *Water Witch* was a decent sort of fellow ——"

"It is here," said Evelyn quietly.

"Here!"

Half a dozen voices cried in concert, but she was looking at Warden.

"You gave it to me at Cowes?" she went on.

"Yes, I did, but ——"

"But I refused it. Well, when they told me at Lagos that you were surely lost in the desert, I asked for it. I — I — almost believed it would bring us together again."

"Let's have a look at it," chimed in Fairholme.

She was strangely reluctant at first, and her unwillingness to produce that sinister carving was not to be wondered at, for she had seen sufficient of the men of Oku during the past few hours to disturb her dreams for many a year. But Warden joined in the chorus of persuasion, and she brought the canvas bag from her room.

"Please open it," she said to her lover. "I dare not. Though I confess to an uncanny confidence in its power, I am still afraid of it."

He drew forth the calabash with a sudden move-

ment, hoping to startle some of the onlookers by the extraordinary vitality of Domenico Garcia's masterpiece, but Evelyn alone was affected, and she uttered a cry of dismay.

"It is ruined!" she exclaimed. "The moist heat has destroyed the lacquer! Even the eyes have gone. Oh, Arthur, please do throw it away this time. The thing is dead!"

In her excitement she had used exactly the right phrase. The man of Oku was dead, in fact decomposed. His face had melted away, his mosaic eyes had fallen out, the mocking smile worthy of a triumphant demon had faded from his thick lips. In truth, the mask on the gourd was a mere travesty of its former self.

Warden was quite as bewildered as the girl.

"Well," he cried, "that is really the most amazing coincidence I have ever known. It knocks any of my adventures into a cocked hat. Just think of it — this thing lived, I tell you. It was a superb creature of genius. It must have been found two hundred years ago when some Portuguese or Spaniards looted Benin. It was brought to England only to be lost in a sailing ship that foundered on the east side of the Isle of Wight. After passing a couple of centuries under the sea, it bobbed up serenely one day last August, disturbed from its resting-place when the Emperor's yacht struck the sunken wreck. I firmly believe it was made within a few miles of this very place, yet it survived through the ages until the hour when the Oku

power is broken for ever, and now it is destroyed. Did you ever hear anything like it? Surely this is a thing not dreamed of in our philosophy."

None but Evelyn among those present could share his opinion. It was impossible for any one who had not seen the calabash on the deck of the *Nancy* to picture the malign fascination of that graven face.

But Warden was convinced of his theory. To please his lady, he bade Beni Kalli take the gourd and throw it on the smoldering embers of the mission huts. And so ended the pilgrimage of the grim contrivance fashioned by Domenico Garcia to carry his story to the world that had forgotten him. It perished in the ashes of the old Kadana, on the site where a new enterprise would soon mark the practical inception of Hume's day-dream.

Nor was the hour far distant when all in that room remembered Warden's emphatic words. Next day came messengers from the King of Oku. His majesty deplored the excesses caused by the evil counsels of certain professors of ju-ju. These men, difficult to control, were aided and abetted by a notorious Portuguese half-caste, one Miguel Figuero to wit, who had helped the Oku rebels by importing arms from foreign territory and generally disturbing the peace of the kingdom.

"I have now dealt with Figuero and the others," said M'Wanga through his envoys. "They will trouble the land no further."

He meant that he had nailed them to trees as a

guarantee of good faith, when, in the small hours of the morning, he grew fully assured that his guns were useless, his river flotilla captured, and his army broken up. Unfortunately for the success of his sudden conversion to British notions of law and order, that which was only a minor disturbance in a native state assumed the gravest political significance when a number of troops of a foreign power crossed the border at various points with the avowed object of restoring peace to a province in which the armed might of Britain was set at nought.

The strongest party of these unlooked-for allies marched on Oku. Its commandant, Count von Rippenbach, seemed to be intensely surprised when he found the city in the grip of a British column, and its king a prisoner awaiting trial by court-martial. He was not only surprised, but intensely chagrined, and was so unwilling to return to his own territory that there were "alarums and excursions" in various centers of diplomacy before he swallowed his wrath, invited the British officers to a farewell dinner, and marched back to the Cameroons. M'Wanga was found guilty of murder and high treason, and was duly hanged in front of his own residence. Pana, the third of the negro visitors to Cowes, was banished to St. Vincent, and the clearance among the witch-doctors which Lord Fairholme so ably initiated was carried a good deal further.

Among the effects of the arch-plotter Figuero were found documents of such highly inflammable nature

that they were promptly interned in the deepest dungeons of the Record Office. But some of his belongings had a more direct interest than state papers for the two people with whose fortunes he was so curiously bound up. Warden came across another copy of the very page of the newspaper he bought at Cowes wherein was described the accident to the imperial yacht. In the same packet were an extract from Evelyn's stolen letter, in Rosamund Laing's handwriting, several complete letters written to him by the girl herself after leaving Lochmerig, and his own long letter delivered to her in Las Palmas by Peter Evans.

It amused him afterwards to enclose these *pièces de conviction* and the scrap of tattooed skin with the full report he was asked to send to the Colonial Office, and there is reason to believe that an Under Secretary for Foreign Affairs borrowed the said report for perusal, and took it with him to wile away the tedious hours of a week-end at the seaside ordered by his doctor.

Warden and Evelyn were married at Old Calabar, with Colville as best man and the Earl of Fairholme *in loco parentis*. The bride's dress was merely a confection of white muslin, but she wore a ruby brooch, roughly contrived by a native jeweler, that would have evoked the envy of many a royal dame. The finest wedding present to the happy pair was the bequest of Rosamund Laing's estate. Poor woman! she had fenced in her gift with no restrictions. Indeed, in her will she hinted at remorse, for she expressed

the hope that Arthur Warden would be happy with the woman of his choice.

No one — least of all those acquainted with West Africa — will be surprised to learn that Warden resigned his commission when the affairs of Oku were settled. His first care was to visit Lisbon, and insure that the name of Domenico Garcia should never again be forgotten in the memorial services for the dead, while every year, in August, a special mass is sung in the Cathedral of the Patriarch for the "repose of the soul" of the ill-fated artist. Two years later, Evelyn and he were on board the *Nancy*, running into Falmouth before a lively breeze, when Peter Evans pointed to a steam yacht.

"There's the old *San Sowsy*," he said.

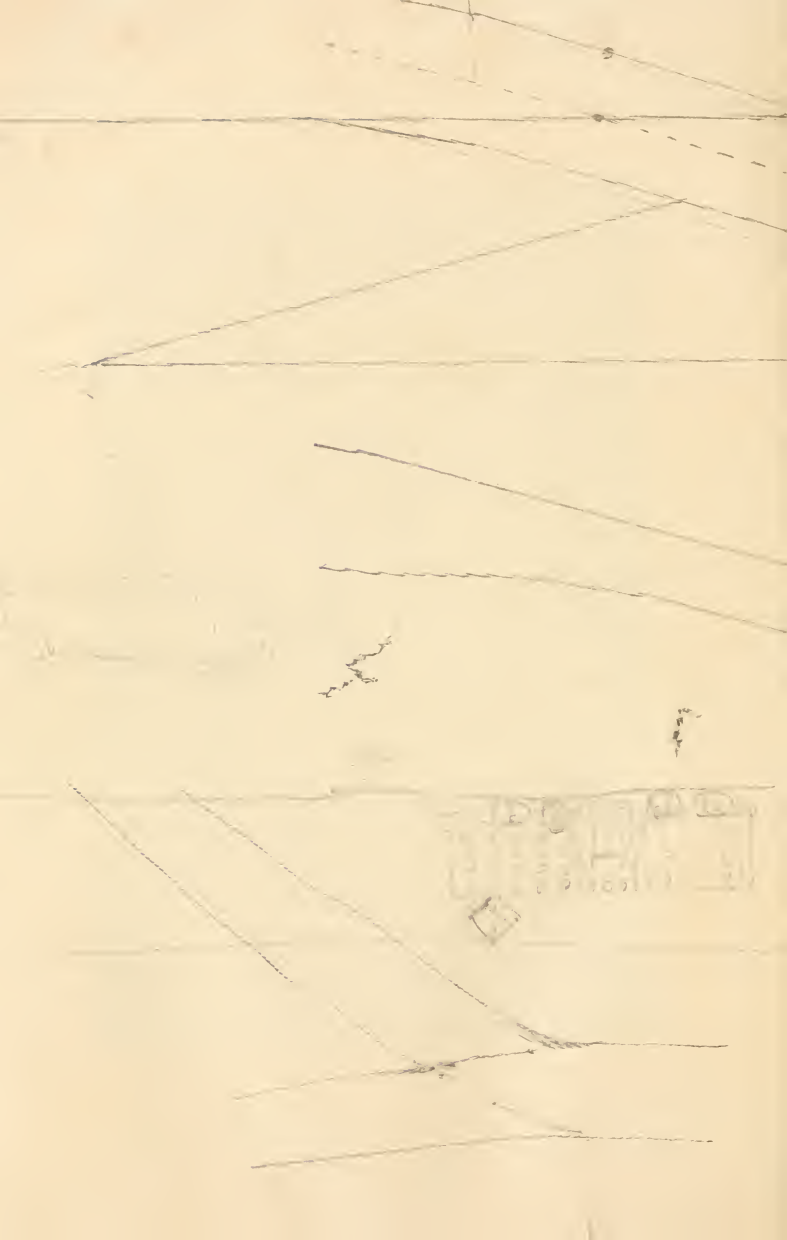
Evelyn instantly turned her binoculars that way.

"You are mistaken, Peter," she cried. "The Baumgartners sold her before they went to South America. She is like the *Sans Souci*, but that vessel's name is *Rover*."

"Beggin' your pardon, mum, but us pilots never troubles about a craft's name. W'y, I've known 'em to be re-christened w'en they was on'y fit for the extry insurance of a castaway. That's the *San Sowsy* right enough. Chris, there's a picter postcard of 'er in my locker. Fetch it, an' we'll run close alongside."

"By Jove, you went to a yacht's agent to get that card for me when I forgot to note the *Sans Souci's* exact lines, although I was asked by the Under Secretary to observe them carefully," said Warden.

Why did you fail to recognize the girl ? *Page* 116



"That's it, sir. It's an old sayin' an' a true one — Keep a thing ten years an' it'll come in useful at larst."

"Fancy you forgetting anything, Arthur!" cried his wife. "You are the one man in the world whom I should never have suspected of missing an item like that — it might have been so important."

"Some places have a phenomenal effect on the memory, my dear. I went to Plymouth with the special object of jotting down all the *Sans Souci's* features, but I took a stroll on the Hoe, and my mind at once became utterly obtuse to every consideration save one."

"Oh, don't be silly! How could I guess you would bring Peter's postcard in evidence against me?"

But she blushed most delightfully, so the recollection of that evening at Plymouth must have been very pleasant, and present happiness is apt to shed its golden light on the days that are past.

THE END